

# Case Study 12: Exploring the Creative Potential

## Kingspark School, Dundee

**This case study outlines a project developed at Kingspark using dance as an agent to unlock the creativity of pupils with special educational needs.**

Kingspark School was purpose-built in the late 1970s and as a relatively modern building provides many excellent facilities for 156 pupils with a wide range of special educational needs. Entering the school the visitor is struck by the bright and attractive environment that clearly celebrates the community and achievements of the school, its pupils and staff. There is a feeling that people matter and that each member of the school community is a valued contributor to the life and work of the school.

Pupils have learning difficulties that are compounded in many cases by additional physical or medical problems. The school serves the city of Dundee but pupils are also drawn from other surrounding council areas. Normally the pupils transfer into Kingspark following a period of assessment at the local primary school although some come in directly from nursery establishments. Referrals from secondary schools are much less common.

The school is organised in four main departments – primary, secondary (including post-16), an all-age unit (5–18) for pupils with profound learning difficulties and complex special needs, and a Department of Practical and Aesthetic Subjects (art, home economics, music, physical education, drama and craft & design). A member of the senior management team, which is led by the headteacher and his depute, heads each department.

The curriculum provided at Kingspark is designed to allow pupils the chance to reach their maximum potential. Generalist staff are supported by specialist staff in the Department of Practical and Aesthetic Subjects who work closely with groups and individuals to enhance the school's determination to provide a broad, balanced, progressive and relevant curriculum for all pupils.

*If we discover practice that works then we will repeat it with other children. We are finding that more flexible approaches are paying off in terms of enhancing the quality of experience for the children and in giving both staff and pupils channels to develop their creativity.*

Lynne Martin, Head of Unit

The goals set within the curriculum are often realised in small but highly significant steps and are achieved with excellent partnership work involving teaching and care staff together with parents. The curriculum is by definition diverse and caters for a wide range of individual and collective needs with a high priority to meet the particular needs of each child. For some of the children the approach is more academic, with a subject focus that makes use of national programmes such as the 5–14 guidelines. However for others with more complex difficulties such an approach is not viable. For these pupils a

specialised curriculum involving the cross-curricular areas of communication, social behaviour, cognitive development, motor development and self-help skills provides the mainstay of educational provision.

*Our joint problem/issue-solving approach is a gradual one which helps us build our understanding of our pupils. Bit by bit we get to know the spark of the person inside and we know when they are motivated and enjoying their work and experiences.*

Each pupil has an individualised education plan (IEP) with specific objectives that reflect the pupil's educational needs. These needs are met in group/class settings and planned by class teachers in collaboration with a range of other professionals who may be involved with a child, including medical and psychologist staff and other carers. The priority in the school is for children to experience learning at first hand and in finding things out for themselves. There is a strong belief among staff that all children have the right to the best possible education and to the opportunity to express themselves and apply their creativity. A lot of the work involves young people making use of the natural environment and exploring their community with an emphasis on social inclusion.

*We firmly believe in the importance of growing confidence and self-esteem. Many of our children will never be high academic achievers but they are keen to participate and learn. We seek to identify not only what they need help with but also what they are good at so we can build on that to give them the motivation to participate and learn more.*

Lynne Martin, Head of Unit

In 1999–2000 school session the unit had a group of seven senior pupils, three of whom were due to leave school in June 2000, engaged in a cross-curricular project involving all the main subject areas but with a particular focus on the expressive arts. Having a set, age-appropriate curriculum is difficult when working with a group of such diverse ability. The school makes use of thematic studies that allow for considerable flexibility of planned approach and content on the part of the teacher. The theme of 'Dundee City' is an important one for Kingspark young people going out into the wider community and it allows for experience in most subjects with a focus on language, communication and expressive work. The topic is part of the class teacher's forward planning with young people at this age and stage. Collaboration with staff in the Practical and Aesthetic Subjects department allowed for the development of aspects of work that were challenging in character and which sought to allow the children to find creative expression and participation in wide-ranging expressive arts contexts including art, dance and music. All the children in the group were wheelchair users and required high input from care assistants and other helpers to be able to engage with physical activities. Nonetheless, specialist staff collaborated with the class teacher to plan a study that allowed the children to work through their IEP objectives and also to participate in a creative group experience of outstanding quality.

The study facilitated work across the curriculum areas and allowed for other personal and social developments through visits, use of technology and collaboration with others within the limits imposed by each child's level of ability. The outputs included varied artwork, the highlight of which was a magnificent mural including input from every young person in the senior class of the unit. Indeed, the work on the mural was very much the stimulus for the development of dance ideas. There was also a significant effort to involve other pupils from other departments in the school in the work with the unit group. They assisted with poetry reading, art input and participation in the dance activities that were developed. In many small ways they facilitated experience for unit pupils by things such as holding musical instruments or supporting schoolmates' hands so that they could play the instruments.

*The pupils from other departments in the school participated for a host of reasons. They identified with the pupils in terms of age and we were able to pursue goals for the secondary department children in areas such as personal and social development by having their involvement. They had participated in dance work in their own studies and in poetry and music work around a McGonigal theme – it was natural for them to extend and develop their skills and experiences in support of their peers in the unit. However that led to some very creative work on their part – particularly in dance.*

Lynne Martin, Head of Unit

*I was working through an SQA guitar module with a secondary pupil who was experiencing behavioural difficulties. I thought it would help him and raise his self-esteem if I used him to teach the support staff who work with the unit children to play some basic guitar accompaniment to match the river performance. The strategy worked well and this was a minor but significant success within the overall event.*

Seonaid Birse, Music teacher

*It was all great – every bit of it! I really enjoyed it! I loved the dancing and it was great fun!*

Alex, Catherine and Lynsey, secondary pupils

The practical and aesthetic staff were *au fait* with the IEPs across the departments and were well placed to link the work of all the participating young people. The involvement of the secondary pupils also allowed staff to develop approaches and material in support of them at access level in Higher Still.

As well as support from peers the care staff, voluntary helpers and young people on placement from a local young offenders rehabilitation programme lent their enthusiastic support to helping the unit pupils in facilitating the movement, dance and musical elements of their study.

*The staff and helpers were brilliant. They were so enthusiastic in their participation and added to the children's sense of achievement by so*

*obviously valuing the whole thing. Children, even with limited abilities, know when something is valued and worth doing and they respond with effort and participation – this was obvious in the unit's project work.*

Lynne Martin, Head of Unit

*The dance developed as an extension of activities in PE lessons. Teachers and carers worked closely to facilitate the pleasures and aesthetic experience of dance and movement. It was important that children and staff contributed choreographic ideas, lost their inhibitions and enjoyed the whole process.*

Jo Workman, PE teacher

*I loved it – I really had a great time. Going to the Caird Hall was certainly a challenge for me personally – it was my first ever time in the place and to be on stage was daunting but the kids were great and we enjoyed it. We now know it can be done.*

Carole Whyte, training and care assistant

The cross-curricular study had the development of creative activity in art, music and dance as a high priority and the development of the dance and movement dimensions worked particularly well. This element was centred on the journey of the river Tay from the countryside around Dundee, through the city to the sea. The theme was developed over several weeks and built up both staff and pupil confidence in dance movement, rhythm and flow. Close collaboration with the music specialist saw the involvement not only of taped music but on occasion live music making involving percussion. Use was made of visual stimuli such as imaginative lighting, audio and tactile experiences, including taped music and sound effects as well as fabrics and aids such as parachute cloth and large ribbons to simulate clouds and water. Children from the secondary department helped facilitate movements and also took a leading role in playing parts such as those involving tumbling shapes in the movement of the river to the sea. Props were made, such as paper seagulls for pupils to manipulate, and the dance was gradually choreographed into a very stimulating representation of the vibrancy of the river's journey. The performance of the piece was a highlight for parents and pupils at the end of the school year.

In the following session a festival of dance in the city was an ideal opportunity for remaining members of the group and new group members to repeat the experience with a performance at the Caird Hall in Dundee. This performance demonstrated the shared harmony of staff and pupils in joint working. The outstanding features were the empathy of carers who facilitated wheelchair movements for the pupils and the individual contributions of the children involved. A lasting impression was made on all who witnessed the event and wide acclaim was given to the work of both children and staff.

*There was no doubting the involvement and creative expression of these young people. It ranged from clear desire to participate by making hand and head movements as well as playing percussion instruments. The video images of both performance events captures*

*the enthusiasm and depth of their involvement. Even those who were unable to hold something or move demonstrated awareness of what was going on and were looking round and responding.*

*It is a risky business with something like performance for a group such as ours – there so much that could go wrong. We are not doing it for the sympathy vote but because we believe that the creative side of our pupils should be given scope. Their participation, collaboration and cooperation are testimony to the worth of taking a chance.*

Lynne Martin, Head of Unit

The 'Story of a River' has caused the school to consider further its approaches to learning and teaching and the place of creativity within both aspects.

*We have reflected on the practice of our teaching in this project particularly in the P&A department. The experience has reinforced our initial moves to bring the various subjects together in one department with a view to even closer collaboration between subject specialist staff such as music and PE. Now we are building in more consultation time between specialist and generalist teachers to develop the notion of teaching the child rather than focus on the subject.*

Lynne Martin, Head of Unit

*Flexibility of working is very important. Flexibility is also necessary to allow things to develop from themes in the organic way which characterised the river topic. There were times when timetables had to be modified and classes rearranged to allow developments to flow. It is vital that the system allows this to happen so that we can exploit opportunities across subject areas and help us to move forward together for the benefit of the child. We have to meet IEP targets but we have to allow staff to meet them creatively and in an interesting way. Staff, as well as pupils are on a journey of challenge and discovery.*

Jo Johnson, Head of Practical and Aesthetic Subjects department

*The beauty of the project was having an approach which allowed us to innovate and develop things as we went along in response to the children's needs. Time is always short but nobody was forced to do things in the way they happened. We solved issues and developed strategies together and we found that team working and participation bring with them an infectious motivation to do things well.*

*The dance opened up so many opportunities and insights for all of us as subject specialists. I didn't really know about the creative side and potential of PE until we got involved in this.*

Beth McDonough, Art teacher

*I really felt that we had succeeded in putting our Unit children at the centre of an important school event. At other events they are always*

*involved but this time they were the stars. I know their parents were enormously proud of their performance and for all of us it was an intensely moving and emotional thing as well as professionally satisfying. It was also real fun. So often our work has to be very repetitive but this was a real change and an interesting development.*

Kathleen Macdonald, class teacher

The development of the river topic at Kingspark highlights a number of interesting features of approaches to the management and organisation of teaching and learning.

- Expectations of pupils achievements are high.
- Pupils are motivated and challenged in their work.
- There is a climate of enthusiasm and pleasure in fostering learning often in very difficult circumstances.
- Flexibility in approach and organisation is a vital element of management and organisation.
- Team working across a range of skills and disciplines is of the highest order.
- Targets are set but creative approaches to achieving them are encouraged.
- Reflection and action on the results is a regular feature of practice.

#### **Extra quotes for use elsewhere in final document**

*I believe that with the unit pupils the expressive arts offer an outlet, a means of expression and a window on their environment which is not available otherwise because of the nature of their disabilities.*

Beth McDonough, Art teacher

*The project saw the integration of our secondary pupils to help the dance development in providing movements beyond the wheelchair. They also helped the Unit pupils in small but significant ways such as providing hands to support musical instruments so that unit children could play them. This is an area of inclusion and integration which we feel it is important to develop further.*

Inez Robinson, Acting PT Secondary