

## Case Study 14: 'The Event' at Fairfield

### Fairfield School, Clackmannan

**This case study describes how Fairfield School used outside arts agencies, community resources and local secondary pupils to develop an 'experience' for special needs pupils with profound learning difficulties.**

Fairfield School is a special school catering for around 20 pupils with severe learning difficulties in the 12–18 age range. A high priority is given to work in overcoming language and communication problems and to the building up of confidence and other personal and social skills.

Just over a year ago the school ran a study support programme making use of Excellence Funding.

*My depute and I saw this funding opportunity come in and we decided that we should 'think big' and have high expectations for our pupils. Why shouldn't they participate even though we would have to customise such a scheme to suit our situation.*

Agnes Morgan, Headteacher

The staff were aware that because of complex transport arrangements for their pupils they would have to build their programme into the school day rather than run with an after-hours time slot. They chose to develop further ongoing work on the theme of friendship, communication and inclusion. The school contacted the National Youth Theatre with a view to seeking specialist help in developing a series of sessions that would explore these aspects through music and dance.

*We use the expressive arts a lot to help the young people access learning across all areas. Staff use all these activities to develop language and communication skills which are fundamental to our work with the pupils. We routinely develop dance as part of the work of the school and the pupils taking part participate in wider special needs dance events. We also have an arts-link project which involves artists coming into the school and working with the pupils on projects involving ceramics, painting and drama. Music therapy is also used to stimulate communication and we have had particular success with individual pupils who have used the sound and reaction sequence in music to begin to understand the give and take of conversation.*

Christine Paterson, Depute Head

In an effort to make more significant moves towards inclusion they also invited senior pupils from the three local authority secondary schools to participate in the programme as peer mentors. In this way it was hoped that mainstream youngsters would gain insights into the issues surrounding disability and that the young people with special needs would gain from the friendship and collaboration with mainstream pupils of their own age. The volunteer mentors

went through an interview with senior staff at Fairfield to ensure that they were ready for the challenges ahead. Staff worked with them in preparing action plans for their involvement in particular aspects of the work such as photography, leading artwork or organisation of activities and workshops. They provided excellent role models for the pupils in responding to the artists and the activities in which all were engaged.

*Basically I wanted to help out with what seemed an interesting project and I wanted to help the young people at Fairfield to get as much as they could from the experience. I felt good about helping and I enjoyed working with the staff and artists. The young folk at Fairfield were definitely up for it as far as participating was concerned and we had a very worthwhile experience.*

Lisa, pupil mentor

*The starting point with our pupils has to be to look at the needs of each young person, consider the range of services and skills which are available and then construct a package which best meets their needs. We are always looking for new and different ways to overtake our objectives and in the study support scheme we felt we an excellent vehicle to take a number of things forward for both the individual pupils and the school as a learning community.*

Agnes Morgan

At the outset it was agreed that the work would take the form of workshops and that the final workshop would be a big one involving parents and out-of-school carers as participants. Planning was a collaborative matter with staff, artists, mentors and the young people themselves involved in developing weekly afternoon workshop sessions. Every week there was a consultation session for reflection on the previous week's activity, action planning for new work and of course workshop activity. At all times school staff and mentors took part with the pupils in the workshops as participants and facilitators to reinforce the relationship and effective communication dimensions.

Each workshop developed or reinforced aspects of the theme and involved different media and materials such as the use of musical instruments, fabrics, gestures and spoken word. The artists deployed their skills to good effect in using gesture, expression and body movement in effecting communication and coordination in the workshops. Workshops were structured so that sometimes participants worked in pairs or groups and skills, such as moving to rhythm and linked actions, were developed. The hour-long final workshop called 'The Event' ranged across all the activities covered in previous workshop sessions and involved everybody who attended. There was significant concentration and application from all the participants and the Fairfield pupils sustained and plainly enjoyed their involvement.

*The staff and carers participated wholeheartedly in the work of SYT with the school – there was never any question of sitting back and letting it happen! There was constant dialogue between the team and school to ensure the experiences were rewarding for the children and*

*also that they met the objectives of the project. Together I think we all met our goals and what left a lasting impression on me was the tremendous feeling of community and partnership which prevailed both during the project and particularly at the end of 'The Event'.*

Simon Ross, Scottish Youth Theatre (Education Officer, 2000)

The final workshop involved the school in using the town hall that in itself posed the challenges of an unfamiliar environment for the young people. However one short acclimatisation session was all that was required for 'The Event' to go ahead.

*'The Event' really impressed me, so much so that I wrote to the school formally congratulating them. The young people were so focused on what they were doing. For mainstream children some of the things they did were perhaps not significant but for my son they were. There was so much he dealt with in terms of altered behaviour such as working easily in a group, tolerating new people, coping with loud noises and concentrating on the task in hand. It was wonderful to see. The way the staff, mentors and helpers worked with the children was also very impressive.*

*Because the children are drawn from such a wide area we as parents don't see much of each other but that night we were all united in celebrating our young folks achievements. It was significant how many parents, carers and respite workers came along to see The Event.*

Lesley, parent

*It was good to see him as part of a group like any other group of young people. He did well, he felt important and I felt he was making a valuable contribution. I was proud of him.*

Sheila, parent

*It was a delight for us to see the pride and pleasure on the part of parents. So often they have to bear difficult issues whereas this was something really different. It was a shared sense of achievement and parents were enormously pleased that their children could do what other children could in terms of taking part in an arts event.*

Senior staff

*One of the strongest features of the work was promoting empathy between the children. Pupils with severe learning difficulties are often very insular and this creative experience really made inroads into tackling that issue. They had to be very aware of one another and really tuned-in particularly when instruction and was given by voice. These experiences heightened their awareness and trust of one another and their responsiveness.*

Agnes Morgan

*This experience really opened our minds to the realisation that there are many things our pupils can do that perhaps we doubted they were*

*capable of. It has promoted a 'can do' kind of ethos and a climate of being prepared to take a risk in the level of challenge to our pupils.*

Christine Paterson, Depute Head

The school learned from the experience and repeated the approach in a new term with a theme on assertiveness in the context of drama with emphasis on role play and mime. Staff decided that this theme was needed to tackle the issue of SEN youngsters who have understandably been protected all their lives and who as a consequence can be reticent about involving themselves in activities. There was no event workshop as in the original project but parents were invited to attend the final workshop in the school in which they also participated. A further development was the running of a summer school for pupils during the vacation period in 2001. This focused on an exploration of the local environment during week one with involvement of the local countryside rangers. The young people offered mentoring support as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme with activities such as preparing picnics, hill walking, fishing and visiting monuments. A photographic and video diary was made of events and a school magazine report and foyer display was prepared.

*When you take risks and reach out to try things you haven't done before, the culture changes. We now involve the youngest of our pupils in their annual review process and we feel we have pushed back the boundaries of their participation and involvement.*

Agnes Morgan

*The Event showed us the children were a lot more capable than we had perhaps assumed and we have all been with them for a long time. Our kids can be as creative as youngsters in mainstream and it underlined the importance of us giving them the opportunities and us using their creativity more in our work. The important thing above all was that they enjoyed these experiences.*

Care Staff

*The involvement of the theatre specialist gave us exposure to new techniques and we learned from their skills and approaches. From the pupils' point of view, working with folk from outwith the school broadened their experience and built their confidence. They enjoyed the work and they rose to the challenges posed by the workshop activities.*

Teaching staff

'The Event' and the subsequent developments at Fairfield highlight a number of features regarding the development and sustainability of creativity in learning and teaching.

- Opportunities to exploit and develop creativity sometimes lie in exploring activity that lies outwith the usual pupil experience and the expected levels of pupil response.
- The steps to building pupil confidence and higher-order skills, such as

collaborative working, may be very small but they need to be accumulated progressively.

- The importance of focusing and motivating pupils on the tasks in hand is significant but once motivation is established the developments take on a motivation of their own that in itself requires careful management.
- The use of role models in terms of specialist staff, involvement of adults in tasks and good peer partnerships, such as a mentoring approach, all contribute to the sense of value that pupils need to sustain their efforts.
- Feedback on progress, the display of work and the opportunity for pupils to have their efforts valued by parents and peers are vital.
- Management requires professional staff and workers to be trusted in what may be professionally challenging situations. In this process, regular dialogue, links to planning, and management appreciation of efforts made are vital.
- Flexibility of timetable arrangements is crucial to allowing creative development to be 'grown' within the curriculum.