

IDENTIFICATION

Partnership:

Rex Emsley: Drama, English and PHSE Teacher, and Citizenship Co-ordinator, Priory School and Sports College, Barnsley
Charlotte Barnes: Creative practitioner (Drama), Dead Earnest Theatre
Matt Butt: Creative practitioner (Media Arts)
Elaine King: Project Mentor

Keywords:

Drama, Media Arts, Citizenship, PHSE, Pupil-Voice

Intended Audience:

This project will interest teachers and creative practitioners of drama and media arts. It provides insight into the ways in which drama and media arts can be used to help pupils express opinions, identify issues and voice ideas for change about school life.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

In this project, a group of Year 7 and 10 pupils addressed citizenship and PHSE issues about school life using drama and media arts. Creative activity focussed on the following four areas:

- finding a voice;
- improving confidence;
- enhancing communication skills;
- developing group collaboration.

The pupils were encouraged to identify areas of school life where they sought improvements and to express ideas for change. We researched the question: Can drama and media arts help pupils to voice opinions and express ideas for change about school life?

The project aimed:

- To explore the ways in which drama and media arts can assist pupils in communicating opinions and ideas about school life;
- To facilitate pupils in learning and developing skills in drama and media arts;
- To identify aspects of school life that are deemed in need of change by Year 7 pupils;
- To promote confidence, collaboration and communication within a group context;
- To provide a starting point for the discussion of potential and wider changes about the school environment.

DIMENSIONS OF THE STUDY

Priory School and Sports College is an LEA 11–16 Comprehensive School with 900 pupils and 45 members of staff, situated in Barnsley. The project involved sixteen Year 7 pupils drawn from a range of classes and four Year 10 pupils, who acted as ‘buddies’ to the younger pupils. The project took place during one term, starting in May 2005, and included eight two-hour sessions. This was a new partnership, specifically set up for the project.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- The use of drama and media arts was extremely effective in helping pupils to voice opinions and ideas for change about school life;
- The pupils learned new skills and developed their abilities in drama and media arts;
- There was a marked improvement across the project in pupils' levels of confidence, communication skills and abilities to 'speak out' about school issues;
- The inclusion of Year 10 pupils (acting as 'buddies' to the Year 7 pupils) was not successful;
- The pupils responded positively to the research methods and creative exercises used in the project and greatly enjoyed participating in it.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This project was initially conceived by Rex Emsley (Teacher, Priory School and Sports College) in response to the need to discover what pupils really felt about school, teaching and their education. As well as adopting traditional methods of consultation, it was envisaged that a more innovative, creative approach using drama and media arts could prove to be both enlightening and exciting.

In the light of the National Curriculum's concept of citizenship, Rex formed a Year 7 School Council to improve communication and dialogue between pupils, teachers and governors. This was seen as an imperative and vital way of involving pupils in school life and establishing democracy. In addition, a 'buddy system' was set up, whereby Year 7 pupils were supported and mentored by selected Year 10 pupils. This scheme aimed to build relationships between pupils in the lower and upper year groups, and to encourage the younger pupils to express their opinions and feelings about school life to the older pupils. The buddies used questionnaires to 'tap into' the opinions of Year 7 pupils regarding the quality of school life, and their findings were used as a starting point for dialogue and debate at the first Year 7 School Council meeting.

To enhance this scheme, Rex recognised the potential for a more focused, in-depth research study using a small cross-section of pupils. The findings of this project would provide further valuable information to feed into the School Council and act as a starting point for improving areas of school life. So, in partnership with Corridor Arts (a local Community Media Arts Organisation), a project outline was proposed to CARA. The main focus of the action research was to find out if Year 7 pupils could effectively voice their opinions about school life using drama and media arts. Pupils of this age group have limited experience of drama and media arts at school, so the project would provide a new and engaging way for them to work. Pupils would be involved in creative activity in an investigation of their views of school life, especially areas they felt unhappy with and deemed in need of change, the results of which would be presented through a drama and media-arts presentation. In conjunction with the 'buddy system', four Year 10 pupils would be recruited to participate in the project as facilitators and mentors to a group of Year 7 pupils. This would not only help to develop pupil relationships, but it would also provide an important and focused role for the buddies in supporting and championing the views of the Year 7 pupils.

On the strength of previous partnership work and successful track records in educational and community settings, Corridor Arts approached Charlotte Barnes (from Dead Earnest Theatre) to oversee drama-based activity in the project and Matt Butt (an independent

practitioner with a well-established reputation of work with Corridor Arts) to deliver media-arts work. The initial proposal was accepted by CARA, but unfortunately the leader of Corridor Arts had to withdraw prior to the start of the project. At this point, Charlotte Barnes (from Dead Earnest Theatre) was asked to manage the project as well as to continue her role as drama practitioner within it. The change of management was surprisingly smooth because the original planning and preparation of the project by Corridor Arts was clear. In addition, the partnership's mentor, Elaine King, was on hand to provide invaluable advice and support during this transition.

Certain changes were made to the original project outline in accordance with the views of the new partnership. The main difference was that a smaller group of Year 7 pupils would be involved over a longer period of time. This would mean that creative work could be explored more thoroughly, and that pupils could develop more skills, both personally and artistically, than originally conceived. The creative practitioners undertook the planning of activities, sometimes in consultation with Rex Emsley; however, due to time constraints, the new partnership was only able to meet once before the initial session. It would have been beneficial to all involved if more time could have been devoted to discussing the intricacies of the project further before commencing work with the pupils.

INTERVENTION: PROCESSES AND STRATEGIES

The eight sessions of the project were divided into three stages, each of which is described in detail below:

- Session 1: Introduction and Group Development
- Session 2–4 Consultation and Building Artistic Skills
- Session 5–8 : Creating and presenting Dramatic and Media Art Pieces

Over the course of the project we employed a range of methods and creative activities to engage the group. These included:

- Drama games and exercises
- Role-play
- Image theatre
- Forum theatre
- Consultation and debate
- Improvisation
- Digital camera work
- Video work and filming
- Editing
- Performance

Session 1: Introduction and Group Development

We introduced the project, explaining the aims behind the research and emphasising the importance of each individual's opinions and thoughts. The group was immediately positive about engaging in media and drama, and seemed to be enthusiastic about the idea of the project.

The session started with an exercise called 'How much do I want to be here?' Each pupil was asked to complete a continuum line, marking a number between one and ten representing how much he or she wanted to be there. This anonymous exercise gave us

an immediate feel for the group's enthusiasm for the project, and became a staple exercise that marked the start of every session.

We created a 'Working Agreement' – a framework of 'rules' that the group was happy to work within. As a team, the pupils had to establish the boundaries in which they would work. The exercise encouraged them to negotiate and collaborate, and proved to be an empowering and constructive task, helping to promote respect and fair decision-making within the group. It also gave a focused role for one of the buddies, who acted as scribe. The final 'Working Agreement' was an important document, and was displayed on the wall for the entire duration of the project.

The rest of the session was spent engaging the group in a series of fun drama games that specifically encouraged teamwork and communication. These high-energy games did not involve any formal 'acting', but were focused on creating a relaxed and interactive environment so that the pupils could feel comfortable working together:

'I liked the exercises with the rope and getting to know each other so we can get along.'

The group participated in a media exercise, introducing them to digital still cameras. They were split into smaller groups and asked to capture images of the other groups. Everybody had the opportunity to use the cameras and to act as models. The idea was to take pictures of various parts of the face, which would then be put together as a quirky collage:

'I enjoyed working with cameras and I loved doing the drama games.'

The session ended with a 'review' exercise, which enabled feedback to be gained from the group in a quick, but effective way. A graph was used to plot the group's enjoyment of each exercise on a scale of one to ten. Thereafter, we used this method of evaluation at the end of each session. Providing the same start and end exercises each week gave a clear structure for the pupils and leaders.

The feedback reflected the success of the introductory session, and, as a team, we felt encouraged by the enthusiasm of the group:

'I think today's lesson was great. Everyone seemed to be very helpful and listened to other people's ideas. I would put on the next week 'How much' to 10. This lesson is very good because you get to share ideas and opinions.'

The buddies had been given specific tasks meaning that they were both helpful and important; however, we felt that their input could be implemented further, and decided that we would try to involve them in the planning of the session the following week. We also noted that it was quite difficult to include everything we had planned within the two-hour time frame of the session.

Session 2: Consultation and Building Artistic Skills

We recapped on the previous session and continued to build a positive group dynamic using team-building exercises and games. The group was split into four smaller teams, each 'supervised' by a buddy. Their challenge was to create a piece of 'image theatre' that was then presented to the rest of the group. Characters were then questioned using 'thought tapping'. This was a successful exercise as it introduced the group to devising

and performing at a simple level. It also encouraged the pupils to think about character and thought processes. By involving the audience, we were laying down the foundations to introducing 'Forum Theatre'.

The group's media work involved using digital video cameras to interview each other. The main aim of the task was to increase their technical skills whilst exploring the theme 'Changes in school'. The students enjoyed interviewing one another and were very inventive and creative in the way that they set up the interviews. They were all willing to operate the camera as well as be in front of it, which held great promise for the future development period of the workshops.

The latter part of the session was spent brainstorming. The pupils were asked to offer their thoughts on the following titles:

- 'What I like about school';
- 'What I don't like about school';
- 'What changes I would make to school'.

The buddies scribed, and the suggestions from the group came thick and fast. Everyone was able to offer his or her opinions in a non-judgemental environment. The documents were displayed on the wall and acted as the source from which we would base our creative work for the rest of the project.

The review showed that the group had again enjoyed the activities, particularly the more interactive work creating 'image theatre' and short films. The consultation was less popular as it was seen as more traditionally 'school like' and less fun.

Session 3: Consultation and Building Artistic Skills

The students were given an introduction to video editing. They were amazed at how easy and proficient they became in the short time that was available, and they all produced a short edited video that the others could watch.

We continued with 'image theatre' as a basis from which to create short dramatic stories. Using the document from the previous week as a catalyst, the groups chose an issue that they felt needed to be addressed and then depicted real-life situations based on school experience. Interestingly, the pieces were surprisingly similar in theme, with most focusing on bullying from older pupils and feelings of intimidation at breaks and lunchtimes. Adding dialogue, to create improvised performances, developed the pieces further. Characters were more fully realised as pupils were asked to think about their motives and objectives. Again, the results of their creative work were both encouraging and positive. Despite very little or no previous experience of these art forms, many of the pupils showed aptitude towards media and drama. The review reflected their obvious enjoyment of the session.

However, only one of the buddies attended this session. As a partnership, we wondered whether the Year 10 pupils might respond more positively to the project by taking on more responsibility. It was decided, if they were agreeable, that the buddies could lead part of the next session, with Rex facilitating the majority of the workshop. The idea behind this was to ensure that Rex's skills and experience could be explored more fully, rather than relying entirely on the creative practitioners.

Session 4: Consultation and Building Artistic Skills

In this workshop, Rex led a number of stimulating and enjoyable drama games and exercises, which utilised the group's energy. Time was also spent thinking about and discussing school issues. At this point, the 'grumble chair' was introduced. Here, pupils were invited to sit on the 'grumble chair' and were then given the opportunity to voice their feelings about school, particularly areas that were causing them problems or difficulties. This was an excellent way of drawing out pupils' real and honest opinions in a structured and secure environment.

This was a successful session that developed the consultancy work with the group. In hindsight, it might have been more beneficial to use the session as a starting point for creating our presentation, as originally planned. Because of this change, at times the production process felt slightly rushed and pressurised.

Sessions 5–8: Creating Dramatic and Media Art Presentations

The remaining sessions focussed on creating work for presentation in front of an audience. The group split into two teams, one focusing on media and the other on drama.

Media Production

First, the pupils were asked to produce a storyboard of a video that they would like to create around one of the issues that they had identified in previous weeks. They had to decide on camera operators, cast, scenes, FX, props and sounds. Once they had done this, they took control of the camera and made individual videos of the various scenes. The work was of a high standard and the group thought that the videos conveyed the issue they were concerned with:

'Today was the best day so far. I have learnt about video recording and how to use most video equipment.'

During the second week of production, the group used digital still cameras to focus on capturing each other's feelings about the selected school issues. Much of the work concentrated on the feeling of being a target for older students throughout the school day. The images were very provocative and they used a slow shutter speed to give the feeling of attack. The images were to be displayed at the performance and put together in the format of a video.

The final session of production again focused on producing videos, but this time the whole group worked together to create longer video works that included everyone. They came up with questions, discussed these in a group and decided how they would like to video these ideas. As a team, the pupils worked well together and produced excellent footage. During this last session, the media group was asked to document whether or not they felt that people would listen to what they had to say. Their video response was revealing, for it suggested that they had little confidence in people listening to and considering their opinions.

Drama Production

The group identified a working theme: 'respect and lack of respect at school'. The pupils felt that their voices were not listened to and that their problems were ignored, particularly by some members of staff. They decided to focus the drama around a Year 7 pupil who is bullied by one of her peers; despite the situation being very visible, the teachers and other members of staff do nothing about it.

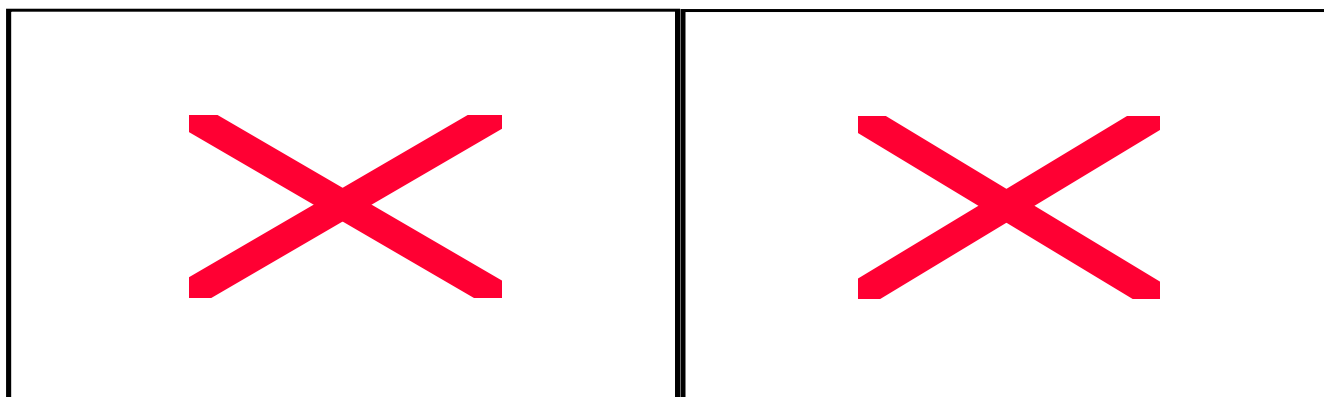
The pupils decided on the characters for the piece and, through negotiation, were able to cast themselves in roles. They mapped out a basic outline of the piece and agreed the content and resolution for each scene. Ideas were then tried out through improvisation.

The group worked effectively together and displayed much creativity in the process. They successfully put together two or three scenes per session, each of which was shown to the media group at the end of the workshop. The positive feedback and suggestions that they received gave the performers a boost and meant that they could try out their ideas to a supportive audience.

With time being a constant threat, the group was introduced to the concept of 'Forum Theatre' at the final session.

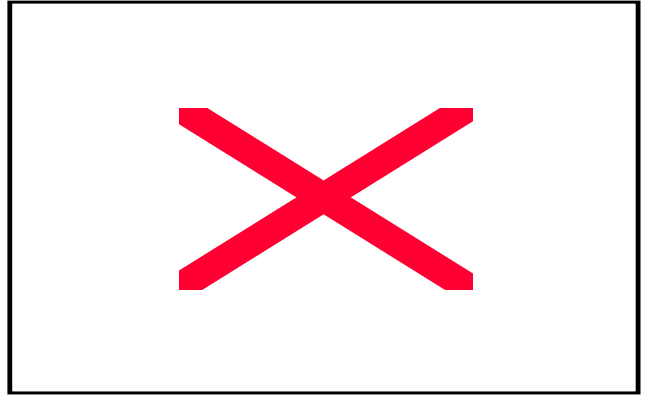
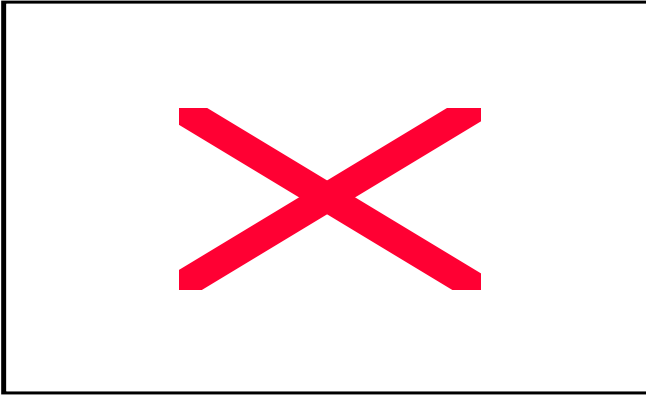
The final piece, entitled 'Respect is not here', was performed to an audience of 60 Year 7 pupils, 30 Year 10 pupils and 5 members of staff. Unfortunately, none of the managerial staff were available to watch the final presentation.

The dramatic presentation itself was well received by the audience. The play was performed with style and then repeated a second time and forumed. The audience offered lots of suggestions to improve the situation of the bullied character, and, impressively, the pupils managed to respond to these interactions. One of the reasons for the success of this piece was that the pupils in the audience were able to relate directly to the issue. Questionnaire responses received from a sample of audience members showed that the majority of pupils agreed that the dramatic presentation was 'true to life', and that they were able to express ideas and opinions about it (see Figures 1 and 2).



Following the Forum Theatre, the pupils in the Media group presented their work. Each member of the group assumed a role for the presentation, including sound, video, curtains, lights and video operator. The pupils fulfilled their aim of documenting work that mattered to them and were able to show it in a professional way to their peers and staff. The feedback they received at the end of the show was very positive, and the pupils displayed obvious pride in the work they had done.

Collectively, we felt that the presentations were a huge success: they provoked the pupils in the audience to discuss school issues, and they made them question their own thoughts about school life. This reaction was confirmed by audience feedback (see Figures 3 and 4), where, for instance, pupils especially indicated the need for 'better toilets', a 'cleaner' school and to 'stop bullying'.

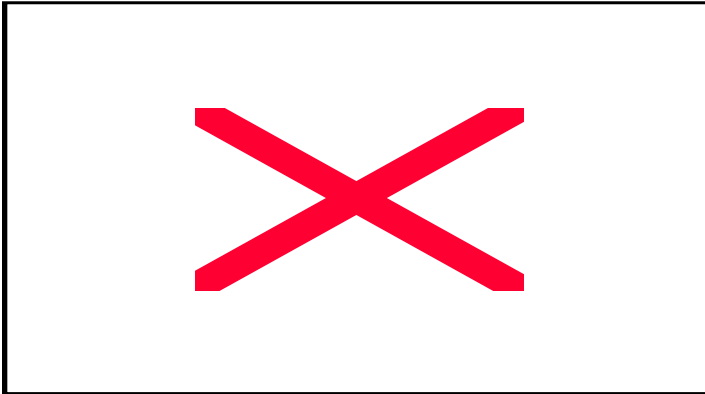


Key (Figure 4): a = be kind to victims; b = better buildings; c = better toilets; d = body guards for bullied kids; e = canteen; f = cleaner; g = finish earlier; h = litter; j = metal detectors; k = more breaks in school time; l = more support from teachers; m = nicer teachers; n = no uniform; o = stop bullying

THE DETAILED FINDINGS

1. The use of drama and media arts was extremely effective in helping pupils to voice opinions and ideas for change about school life.

The project provided the pupils with time to thoroughly explore their true feelings about school life. An environment was set up that was non-competitive and non-judgemental, allowing the group to feel safe. The process of writing up and displaying comments meant that we had a permanent record of thoughts that could be referred to from one session to another. It also meant that every single contribution was valued. The pupils' responses to the use of drama and media arts in helping to voice thoughts positively changed across the project as they were exposed to new creative tools (see Figure 5a).



One pupil commented that:

'You can let all your feelings and emotions out when you act and using media you can capture the emotions on films or photographs'.

Using drama meant that the pupils had the 'distance' to explore potentially scary or worrying personal issues in the safety of being 'other characters':

'Drama is a good way to communicate your thoughts and feelings because telling a person can be harder than showing them';

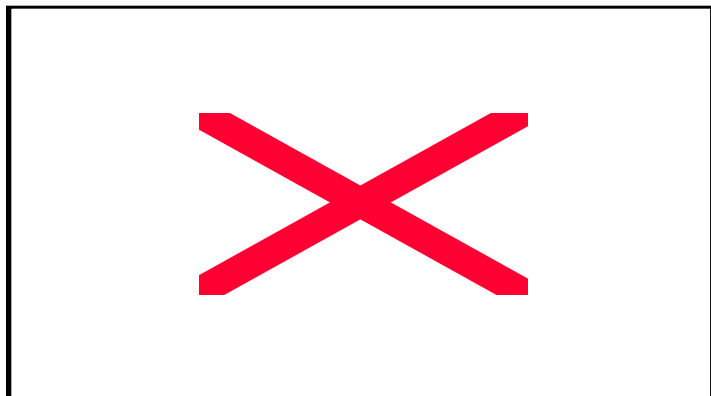
'If you just talk to some one they might not listen, but in drama people are more interested so they listen';

'I have learnt how to interpret my feelings in drama'.

Media activity also provided a great way for pupils to express themselves:

'Media shows you don't always need words to show your feelings'.

At the end of the project, all of the pupils felt that drama and media arts could be used as a means to express ideas for change about school life, although in varying amounts: 'often' (67%), 'all the time' (25%) and 'sometimes' (8%) (see Figure 5b).



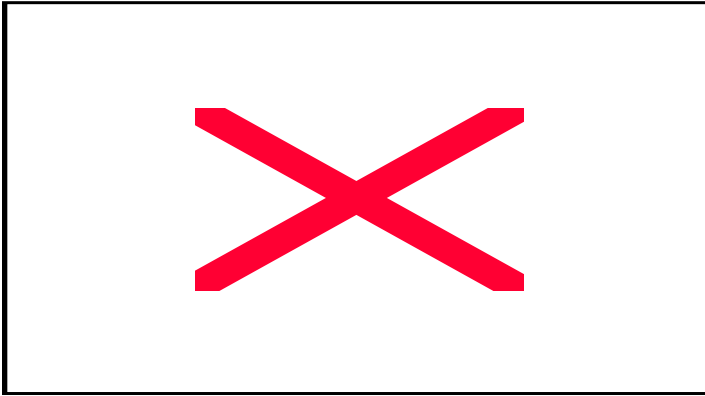
2. The pupils learned new skills and developed their abilities in drama and media arts.

The Year 7 pupils had very little experience in media arts or drama before participating in the project. They all obtained basic media skills, including using a digital camera, storyboarding, videoing, editing and sound recording. For drama, each individual developed skills in improvisation, releasing imagination, voice control and dynamics, and basic stage presentation. The development shown by most of the pupils was inspiring, and was reflected in their enjoyment and pride in their work. A particular triumph was the fantastic performance from one boy who has a stutter. He mentioned that this was a concern to him, but nonetheless managed to perform with finesse and communicated brilliantly with an audience. Also, two of the girls who showed particular flair in drama have subsequently been asked to take part in a large-scale production by a local Professional dance/theatre company.

One pupil's reaction sums up our observations: *'I have learnt how to act!'*

3. There was a marked improvement across the project in pupils' levels of confidence, communication skills and abilities to 'speak out' about school issues

At the beginning of the project, some of the pupils appeared to be reticent about talking in front of the group and seemed uncomfortable about offering their opinions. However, over the eight sessions, we observed positive changes that were also recognised by the pupils themselves. For example, their responses to 'speaking out' in a group altered at different stages in the project (see Figure 6).



The pupils comments about 'speaking out' included:

'[Here, I can speak out] about anything because everybody listens and nobody laughs';

'I have been talking more and feel I can express my feelings if I need to';

'I have learnt to communicate with people and not to be nervous';

'I have learnt to speak more confidently around adults. Also I have learnt how to make new friends and be a better person'.

4. The inclusion of Year 10 pupils (acting as 'buddies' to the Year 7 pupils) was not successful.

Unfortunately, the buddies were not involved in the entire project as they withdrew after the third session. The reasons they gave for not wishing to continue were exam pressures and the need to attend their normal lessons. Although this was the case, we questioned whether or not they might have been more committed to the project if they had had more ownership of it, and had been more engaged with planning and leading activities. However, when asked if they would like to lead part of a session, they agreed to it, but then did not turn up to deliver it. So perhaps this responsibility put them off?

What we learnt from this was that we needed to develop a stronger working relationship with the buddies so as to find out what kind of roles they wished to assume within the project and how they wished to carry these out. Next time, we will involve them more closely from the start, especially in planning material for sessions.

5. The pupils responded positively to the research methods and creative exercises used in the project and greatly enjoyed participating in it.

The attendance of Year 7 pupils was consistently high, and we were able to see how keen and enthusiastic they were throughout the project by the results obtained from the initial group exercise about 'How much do I want to be here?' In Session 1, the marks on the continuum line ranged from 4 to 10. However, from Session 2 onwards, the marks were consistently high, the vast majority being 10 with very few being lower scores. General comments reflected the pupils' enjoyment of the sessions and positive feedback emerged in the reviews at the end of each session as well as in pupil diaries and end-of-project evaluation forms:

'I started to look forward to Tuesdays';

'I wish it was on every day because it is cool'.

One pupil nicely summarised the project: *'It was fun, exciting, emotional'.*

PARTNERSHIP

We felt that the partnership worked very well and that the project was beneficial for both adults and children involved. As facilitators, we were able to share expertise and knowledge, and learn new skills from one another. Rex Emsley described how he had gained an increased repertoire of games and exercises, new ideas to use in the classroom and an insight into totally new areas of media.

Team facilitation was also positive for the pupils as they adapted to various role models and diverse delivery styles, which helped to create a respectful working atmosphere. Occasionally, sharing the task of leading the session became complicated, generally due to time constraints and having to be vigilant about sticking to the plan. However, this in itself encouraged us as leaders to be more flexible and adaptable, which could only be a good thing.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

This research project provided a fantastic opportunity for everyone to gain new insights into the way in which we work as creative artists, collaborators and researchers. As a partnership, we gained extremely valuable experience and we would very much like to run a similar project again. Any future project along these lines, however, should allow more time for planning, delivery, evaluation and reflection.

Professionally, we were able to develop our artistic practices with young people as well as have the opportunity to explore new territory. Working with other artists was refreshing and rewarding, and it was exciting to have the chance to take risks and learn from one another.

Whether the pupils' work will make a difference, time will tell. They were able, however, to express opinions and ideas for change through dramatic activity and media arts so that the rest of the group and the invited audience could hear their voices.

RESEARCH METHODS

The following methods were used to aid our research:

Qualitative Processes	Quantitative Process
Pupil Diaries Video Photographs Session Observations Artists' logs Evaluation forms	Questionnaires Continuum lines Review graphs

CONCLUSION

Can drama and media arts help pupils to voice opinions and express ideas for change about school life?

Our findings indicate that the answer to this question is 'yes': the Year 7 pupils and the audience who viewed the presentations responded positively to the use of drama and media arts as creative tools both for assisting pupils in voicing opinions and for helping pupils to express ideas for change. At this stage, however, it is impossible to say whether or not the pupils' views and opinions as expressed within in this project will be taken seriously and actually make a difference to school life.

During this research project, the pupils identified a range of issues about school life that they considered to be in need of change. Their findings will undoubtedly influence the Year 7 School Council's agenda, whose discussion points will be communicated to the rest of the school. It is hoped, therefore, that the pupil-voice will impact upon the staff and managerial officers in the school, and that they in turn will be able to use this data in a constructive and positive way.

FURTHER READING

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