

Project **The Room of Many Me's**

Schools **Richard Cloudesley School
Thornhill Primary School
Stephen Hawkings School**

Boroughs **Islington and Tower Hamlets**

Outline **The Room of Many Me's was a developmental collaboration between Creative Partnerships London East and Graeae, the UK's leading disabled theatre company, that explored identity, difference and understanding. The project was designed as a creative learning experience for pupils based on Graeae's core philosophy of the aesthetics of access which in itself is rooted in a diversity of communication styles.**

The Room of Many Me's a collaboration with Graeae Theatre Company

Creative Partnerships London East and South case study



About the schools

The project took place in three primary schools, two in Islington (Richard Cloudesley and Thornhill) and one in Tower Hamlets (Stephen Hawkings). Stephen Hawkings is a special school for 76 pupils aged 2-11 years. Just over two-thirds of its pupils have profound and multiple learning difficulties and one-third have severe learning difficulties. A number of pupils also have complex medical conditions. Pupils have very low levels of attainment in comparison with other pupils of their age. A very high percentage of the pupils (71%) take free school meals, and housing issues and unemployment are features of the area that the school serves. Almost all pupils (85%) come from homes where English is not the first language. (Ofsted 2002)

Richard Cloudesley is a maintained special school for pupils from 2-19 years. All pupils have a physical disability and most have communication difficulties. Almost two-thirds of pupils have profound and complex learning difficulties and a few have additional hearing or visual impairments. Half of pupils are entitled to free school meals; 60% have English as an additional language and almost half are from minority ethnic groups. (Ofsted, 2003)

Thornhill is a large mixed primary school of 384 pupils aged 3-11 years. Overall there is a slightly higher proportion of girls than boys. Most pupils live in the immediate locality. The school has a rich diversity of cultures, faiths and languages, which reflects the composition of the community in which it is based; 30% of the pupils come from minority ethnic backgrounds; 22% come from homes where English is not their first language and 48% of these pupils have been identified as needing additional support in English and a number are in the early stages of learning English. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, at 26%, is above the national average and 25% of pupils are on the register of special educational needs. (Ofsted 2001)

Project context

Creative Partnerships London East felt that work by and for disabled people was under-represented in its output and approached Graeae to develop an example of good practice of work in primary schools.

Established in 1980, Graeae is highly regarded for its innovative work, particularly around the creative use of sign language and audio description. The company profiles the skills of actors, writers and directors with physical and sensory impairments and promotes the inclusion of disabled people in professional performance. Since 1997, it has been led by artistic director, Jenny Sealey.

Graeae's work in schools includes workshops attached to core productions, Forum Theatre and specialist tailor made workshops. For Jenny, the project provided a number of development opportunities for Graeae; placing a new team of disabled artists into schools where they could act as positive role models (for young people and teachers) and build on their planning, workshop delivery and team working skills. Jenny also wants the company to increase the visibility of disabled adults generally: 'I thought when I grew up I wouldn't be deaf any more. [The project is] about that. And it's also about, if you want to be an actor, you can be. ...It's so rare to see a disabled person on television'.

The project set out to be a collaboration between artists and teachers sharing artistic ideas, an awareness and understanding of preferred learning styles and to develop a model of work that has the potential to influence other artists and educators. Its key aim for young people was to develop their self-esteem, communication and creative skills and appreciation of the arts and for them to actively contribute to their schools' disability awareness.

As originally conceived and presented to schools, the project was in two parts: in the first phase, young people would learn how to do an access audit of their school and explore a series of creative short-term solutions where spaces may be inaccessible. They would become the architects, curators and guides of their own learning environment and find new ways to present this through film, artwork and audio descriptive narrative. The second phase was to focus on the creation of an exploration of their own (each pupil's) identity, what it is that makes them unique and how can they communicate this visually to make it accessible to deaf people and how to use words, sounds or tactility to make it accessible for a blind person.

The ideas were developed with mainstream schools as the main target but it was anticipated that special schools would also find the project interesting, even if slightly less so in terms of the access audit (although Jenny did not think this aspect of the project would be redundant in special schools).

In September 2005, London East mailed information about the project to approximately 25 schools across Hackney, Islington, Newham and Tower Hamlets. Having researched those that they felt had the capacity to engage with the project the schools contacted included mainstream, those with integrated provision and special schools. Stephen Hawkings and Richard Cloudesley were the only schools that responded to the mailing. Jenny brought Thornhill School on board through personal contact with their home support teacher. The reasons for the disappointingly low take-up have not been followed up with schools but Jenny thinks, in retrospect, that the proposal was possibly too ambitious for schools who, when they read the information could not see how the project would work.



The Room of Many Me's

The timetable for the project was developed after consultation with the schools, who requested that the activity was spread over two terms. Each school had five days contact time with the artists, originally scheduled in the following stages: stage one – an access audit, one day in each school in January 2006; stage two – dance and drama workshops, two days in each school in early March 2006; stage three – making workshops, two days in each school in late June 2006. These three stages were to be followed by a showing of the work of all three schools to an invited audience in July 2006. There was also one twilight session for teachers in each school.



Jenny wanted to do the whole project over a month which she felt would have been good for the artists and for the young people. All the artists involved (and at least one of the teachers) felt that time was lost recapping at the start of the second and third stages of the project.

The twilight sessions, partly a short demonstration of what the artists would do with the pupils, were run by Jenny, Daryl Beeton, project coordinator and Alex Bulmer, writer. Jenny felt that, 'All the teachers were slightly fazed at meeting disabled artists, even though they work with disabled children'. The teachers' main concern, especially at the two special schools, was how their pupils would access the work and so the twilight sessions became about 'just convincing them that we had enough skills and expertise among us as artists to tailor the workshops to their needs, to build trust and understanding'. That said, Jenny acknowledges that the twilight sessions were helpful for the artists as teachers could spot potential barriers for their students, for example in the choice of materials to be brought into the schools to make the boxes.



The timetable was adapted almost immediately after it was put in place, with the access audit becoming more of a 'getting to know you' workshop between the artists and pupils, and the workshops for the second and third stages being a combination of drama and games, making and filming.

Each pupil made their own 'mini-installation' using a shoebox that they decorated, containing a photograph taken by them, plus items they had made, objects that they liked or had significance, letters or notes they had written. They also made

a single object, either based on something in the box or on something important to them or that expressed their creative imagination. The pupils were encouraged to record on a roll of wallpaper what they liked about the activities and their other thoughts on the project. All schools used the same paper and drama facilitator Nicole Stoute felt that, 'the wallpaper as a method of sharing and exploration was a useful tool which connected all the students. It was wonderful to see that, regardless of ability, and once all the work was placed on a canvas, there was no difference between the children'.

Games and drama exercises were designed partly as ice-breakers but more importantly as ways to get the young people to express themselves creatively, and to think about what makes them different from their peers, for example, 'when I grow up I want to be...'. Some of the exercises were filmed.



The use of the film evolved during the project, as part creative expression and part documentary. Çağlar Kimyoncu, the filmmaker on the project, had wanted the young people to make the film but time constraints prevented this and he both shot and edited the film that was a key element in the final sharing of work. Gaining permission to film was a challenging aspect of the project. Each school had a different stance on this and the Graeae artists wanted an irrefutable yes or no from the young people as well as parental permissions. At one of the schools, Çağlar felt 'intrusive, voyeuristic' as it was unclear whether the pupils were happy to be filmed. One pupil's parents refused film permission and Çağlar sensed that the camera agitated some of the pupils.

The final film makes clever use of non-attributable images and fast edits, video and stills making it unclear which pupils attend which of the three schools involved in the project. Soundscape artist Chas De Sweit was brought in after the third stage workshops to record sounds and songs at Stephen Hawking School which were edited into the film soundtrack, increasing its accessibility and balancing the few visual images from the school included in the film.

Twenty-nine (including disabled and non-disabled pupils) year 5 pupils from Thornhill Primary School took part in the project. From Stephen Hawking School there were eight pupils, and from Richard Cloudesley six.

The sharing took place in July at Richard Cloudesley School. It was intended that all three schools should come together for this but because of transport and other difficulties, the pupils from Stephen Hawking School did not attend, although members of the Graeae team visited the school to give them copies of the film and congratulate them on their work. All of the Thornhill class came to Richard Cloudesley and the pupils played some of their favourite games and exercises together, before watching the film and viewing all their boxes and objects which had been hung by the Graeae team in a box-shape in the school hall. The sharing culminated with every pupil standing by the object they had made and giving one word to describe the installation. This meeting of the two schools was one of the highlights of the project for many of the staff and artists. Jennifer Smith, the teacher at Thornhill Primary School said of her pupils that they were 'so comfortable when they came to Richard Cloudesley, happy to sit next to the Richard Cloudesley pupils. They learned this through the project'.

Games and drama exercises were designed partly as ice-breakers but more importantly as ways to get the young people to express themselves creatively...

Impact and outcomes

The Room of Many Me's was a highly ambitious project. It brought together a new group of disabled artists with different access needs to work in primary schools where there were pupils with a range of access needs and means of communication. It aimed to address access in the schools. It aimed to develop the creativity of young people through a range of artforms, culminating in an installation of work from three schools in one venue with all the pupils present. It aimed to be a collaboration between teachers and artists sharing artistic ideas. And all this in the space of six months, with only five days contact time between artists and pupils and three twilight sessions between teachers and artists. It is not surprising, therefore, that different elements of the project achieved different degrees of success.

All the pupils involved seemed to enjoy the project and the relationship with the Graeae artists. When asked if he had done anything on this project that he had not done before, one boy replied 'had fun – in my life, 'cos I take things too seriously'. And one of the pupils at Thornhill said, 'It's nice to know other disabled people like me or H – just to make friends with them'. Teachers reported that pupils said they were sad to see the artists leave and were asking when they would return. There was a very fluid and natural dialogue between the artists and pupils at both Richard Cloudesley and Thornhill Primary Schools; the nature of how pupils at Stephen Hawking School communicate made it more difficult to assess this but staff indicated that the project was well-received by their pupils.

All the pupils produced their own 'room' (box) and object, and participated in the exercises and games devised for them by the artists. Jennifer Smith, 'was especially impressed with the progress in the children in a variety of ways. The warm-ups and games helped them to come out of themselves, enabled them to express themselves and to think as individuals, to speak and to share with the group'. As Jenny Sealey put it, 'We've demonstrated in all three schools that there is a conceptual artist in every one of us'.

In these respects, the project met its key aim for young people to develop their self-esteem, communication and creative skills and appreciation of the arts however it did not result in them (the young people) actively contributing to their schools' disability awareness. Due to the participating schools being special or integrated, the access audit diminished as a key element to the project and with the change of artistic personnel, the idea of the young people learning how to make their work accessible to blind and deaf people was not fully realised. (The three artists delivering the second stage and the four artists delivering the third stage of the project all have mobility impairments.)

There was collaboration between teachers and artists but more in their interaction in the classroom, rather than in sharing artistic ideas. The project was more or less fully formed when the artists started work in the schools and teachers had not been asked to contribute to its planning. The teachers did not seem to be unhappy about this lack of involvement in planning. The interaction in the classroom varied from school to school. At one school, the teacher sensitively offered whispered suggestions to the lead artist. While they had initially resisted using some of her behaviour management techniques, the artists eventually started to use them, recognising that the pupils knew and responded to these strategies. The teacher said she had learned how the children can grow as learners by seeing the artists giving them guidelines without giving them a list of things to do. She could see the value of this freer style of teaching.

The Graeae artists were constantly flexible in their approach, adapting activities to suit the different size of the group they were working with in the three schools and the range of communication methods used by the pupils.



One of the Graeae access workers said how amazed she was at how different the project was in each school and how it was adapted for each school.

The artists repeated the view that The Room of Many Me's was 'a mainstream school project adapted for special schools'. Jenny Sealey said she would be unhappy if Graeae was only delivering in special schools. 'I really wanted Graeae to work in mainstream schools – for those young people to see disabled artists.' Some of the artists felt that special schools use creativity and the arts so much more (than mainstream schools) that what the project brought to those schools was more about positive role models than about a different way of working.

All the artists felt that the project would have benefited from being more intensive, probably taking place in one term rather than stretched over two. They felt they lost momentum between visits to the schools and had to use time recapping on previous work rather than building on it. In addition to this, although the number of days spent in each school was the same, contact time varied because of the length of the school day or how it was organised. They recommended that time spent in each school should be in proportion to the needs of the school and the pupils.

Artists felt that if the project was to run again, they would benefit from training in 'the vast range of communication needs that children in special schools have: visual aids, tactile material, sound' and for more preparation time in special schools, eg, observing the class and getting to know how the pupils communicate. There was also a view that the full artistic team needed to be at the twilight session with teachers, to develop their trust. While the team was under pressure to help the pupils create their boxes and objects for the joint installation, they were very positive about bringing together the pupils from different schools, as were their teachers.

There is no reason to doubt that these views and much other feedback from the artists will be taken on board by Graeae as it develops its educational work. Jenny Sealey saw The Room of Many Me's as a pilot project. She has plans to create a team of disabled artists to work in schools, responding to requests and ideas from schools. She wants to build relationships with a group of schools, developing their trust and belief in Graeae to bring something to the schools that they do not provide for themselves. The project team identified the following benefits that the project provided the participating schools: disabled creative artists; the opportunity to share work across several schools; role models and interaction with disabled artists; a different type of interaction – the children were encouraged to think about themselves and others in a creative, artistic manner; non disabled children responding to the leadership of disabled people.

Jennifer Smith had this to say about its impact, 'the project has been more than I expected; we've had an amazing time. ...Some specific children have made remarkable moves forward – in group interaction and in expressing themselves creatively. ...It has been such a positive experience, I'd recommend it to other classes and schools.'

Katrina Duncan

Number of pupils involved **43**

Number of sessions **34**

Number of teachers and support staff involved **15**

Year groups **5 and 6**

Creative Partner **Graeae Theatre Company**

Creative partner

Graeae is a disabled-led theatre company that profiles the skills of actors, writers and directors with physical and sensory impairments. The artistic approach creates aesthetically accessible productions that include a disabled and non-disabled audience.

www.graeae.org

Writer

Katrina Duncan is an arts manager and consultant of over 25 years experience, specialising in arts and social inclusion. From 2001 to 2005, she managed a large funding programme for Youth Music that supported organisations (working in partnerships and consortia) running participatory music-making activities for under 18s. Currently, she is project managing a large music education event being produced by Serious (international music producers) for the Music Manifesto and working with Dance United, a contemporary dance company running an action-research programme with young offenders in Bradford. Katrina is also an experienced trainer and evaluator.

Creative Partnerships

Creative Partnerships is a programme managed by Arts Council England, the national development agency for the arts in England. It gives young people in 36 disadvantaged areas across England the opportunity to develop their creativity and their ambition by building partnerships between schools and creative organisations, businesses and individuals. Creative Partnerships aims to demonstrate the pivotal role creativity and creative people can play in transforming education in every curriculum subject for children of all ages and abilities.

London East and London South were established as two of the first sixteen Creative Partnerships areas in 2002, delivering programmes with schools in Hackney, Islington, Newham and Tower Hamlets and Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark over a four year period.

In April 2006 the two areas merged to form one Creative Partnerships area delivering a joint creative programme in eight boroughs. Creative Partnerships London East and South is now based at Discover in Stratford.

Creative Partnerships London East and South
Discover, 1 Bridge Terrace, London E15 4BG
T: 020 8536 5558
F: 020 8555 3948
E: londoneast&south@creative-partnerships.com
www.creative-partnerships.com

This case study is available to download on the Creative Partnerships website. To view this, and to view the other case studies in this series please visit **www.creative-partnerships.com** and go to the **London East and South homepage**.

Photos: Dee Conway

Design: Thirdperson www.thirdperson.co.uk

ISBN: 0-7287-1290-3
978-0-7287-1290-4