



Dorset
Community Foundation

Wimborne Community Theatre
original theatre in unusual places



**A Report on 2 after school Drama Clubs run by WCT with
Allenbourn Middle School, Wimborne and Beaucroft
SEN School & St. Michael's Middle School, Colehill
funded by Dorset Community Foundation Education Grant
May - July 2014**

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Background

- The project involved Wimborne Community Theatre (WCT) setting up and running 2 After School Drama Clubs in Wimborne and Colehill during the summer term 2014, alongside staff from all three schools.
- None of the schools have Drama embedded in their core curriculum.
- The project was to focus on the topic of World War One commemorations locally
- It formed part of Wimborne Community Theatre's overall projects on the theme.

Aims

- Offer extra-curricular opportunities to young people aged between 8-13
- Develop new opportunities for inclusion and integration for young people educated in separately in SEN and mainstream schools.
- Create a short performance for parents and friends.
- Enable young people to learn informally out of school hours through the arts.

Project Format

- Participants all volunteered to take part in the project. 20 young people attended each workshop (40 in total)
- The theme of the project was World War One. This coincided with WCT's ongoing commitment to this topic and allowed WCT to share its previous research and development with younger members of the community of all abilities.
- Selection for the project was based on: pupil's own choice; staff judgment (of who might most benefit and had previously received less opportunities for such activities than others); and parental choice.
- Participants attended 13 workshops in total (7 with Allenbourn Middle and 6 with St Michael's & Beaucroft together.)
- Dates were chosen by WCT's Project Co-ordinator and Facilitator, Tony Horitz, in conjunction with staff from all schools, at initial meetings in March 2014.
- Throughout July, participants met weekly, on Wednesdays and Thursdays, leading up to the final performances within school hours at St. Michael's School, Colehill, and at on a Saturday at Wimborne Children's Centre's Forest Garden in Wimborne Town Centre.

Outline of Activity

- Tony Horitz introduced the project by sharing some artefacts gathered during WCT's earlier research phase, in which they had interviewed elder members of the community. He also shared photographs and text gathered from history books.
- Afterwards, he brought to life a true incident concerning the war-time history of young people in the area through a short performance, followed by extensive role-play with participants.
- The incident referred to an order issued to all children to go and collect conkers to help the war effort. (These were to be used as an agent in the preparation of explosives for the war effort).

- He then wrote a script, with parts for all participants, based on research and on inputs from participants to the role-playing and improvisation during the first session.
- In subsequent weeks, children learnt their lines and explored ways of the script into theatre, through games, exercises and direction from Tony.
- Allenbourn School's inputs included a visit to the Forest Garden site, where they were to perform outdoors, alongside adult members of WCT on the final performance for parents and friends on Saturday 19 July 2014.
- St Michael's & Beaucroft's inputs were to be shared between each school, but unfortunately ended up taking place exclusively at St. Michael's, due to a series of events beyond the control of staff.
- Their joint performance took place at the end of the school day, watched by parents, and other members of the school.
- Two other WCT members took key adult roles during the final stages of the project with the young people, enhancing the relationship with the community and offering strong role models for the children.

Analysis of the Project

Even though young the participants at Allenbourn reflected a wide range of abilities, including dyspraxia and dyslexia, they were very different to work with from the mixed group, comprised of the two other schools, who worked together throughout the project.

The Allenbourn group was extremely amenable, well behaved and good at concentrating and focusing throughout. This meant it was easy to make progress with them, work through a script and rely on them to learn lines and remember sequences of action.

St Michael's students were likewise very amenable, and if anything more naturally talented as performers than the Allenbourn children. But the inclusion of the group from Beaucroft made for a real challenge for them all.

In terms of improvisation, many of the Beaucroft students were very spontaneous and whole-hearted in their entry into the fictional drama. But they appeared much more tired than the others when they arrived at St. Michael's School for sessions after schools. This meant that they sometimes found it hard to concentrate for long periods. To compensate, we tried to keep activities fluid and fast-paced to hold their attention. Generally, this worked.

Once the script was produced, new challenges arose, as few of the Beaucroft students were literate. Fortunately, we found a way of addressing this challenge, by using the students from St. Michael's as co-educators in the project.

In practice, this meant dividing scenes into small groups of 4 characters. We put 2 St. Michael's students and 2 Beaucroft in each group.

We turned the fact that the Beaucroft students took a while to walk to the St. Michael's site each week into an advantage. We used the time to discuss the project with the St. Michael's students and to prepare them for an enhanced mentoring 'role' - to help the Beaucroft students learn their lines and actions by going the scene in their small groups several times.

This had very interesting results. While a few St. Michael's students (all boys), clearly didn't find this easy or to their taste (demonstrated by their disappearance in future sessions), most of them proved very adept at relating to the Beaucroft students, demonstrating admirable skills of patience, empathy and affection towards them.

This resulted in the Beaucroft students quickly forming strong friendships with the St. Michael's students. It also motivated them to develop their drama skills. Almost surprisingly, the short scenes emerged organically and were shared informally at each session. When it came to allocating extra lines for the last part of the short emerging play, the Beaucroft students were as keen to volunteer as the St. Michael's students, whose ranks were swelled by new members after a couple of weeks.

Teachers from both schools were very touched by this very positive interaction. In an age when young people are often criticized for being selfish and apathetic, it was very heartening to see such kindness and compassion nurtured through a cultural, educational project.

In this way, skills learnt through the project extended beyond acquisition of theatre skills into visible development of self-esteem and self-confidence. Learning included understanding of the needs of others and ways of relating in verbal and non-verbal ways to people with differing abilities.

When asked alone about their enjoyment of the inclusive project, all the St. Michael's participants responded very positively, saying how much they were enjoying working with Beaucroft.

The Headteacher and Office staff at St. Michael's, who inter-acted with Beaucroft on their arrival, expressed great enthusiasm for the impact of the students coming to their school and to the inclusive atmosphere engendered throughout. As a result of this, on the last day, they invited the Beaucroft students to have a shared lunch with their St Michael's counterparts in the school canteen, alongside all other members of the school, before going out to play with them.

Two excellent recent Graduates from the Arts University Bournemouth Costumes for Stage and Screen Course joined the second half of the project and did an excellent job, creating drawings to help parents of all participants provide the basics of historical costumes, as well as making several smocks and caps to go with them.

The Performances

Over 70 parents and other members of the community attended the schools' sharing of their work. Both were deemed highly successful, in spite of their very differing contexts.

Working together, St. Michael's & Beaucroft Schools performed in the school PAD, a purpose built common room and arts studio where most rehearsals had taken place. Though nervous at first, the participants entered the performance enthusiastically. Most of the Beaucroft students performed skillfully, remembering their lines and sequences.

One or two departed from the script and improvised in very dramatic style – showing their commitment to the story, whilst making it hard for the others to keep to the storyline. But to their great credit, every member of St. Michael's and most of Beaucroft, kept their focus and concentration and completed the play successfully.

Evaluation

Parents were very impressed by the performances and by the opportunities the project had granted their children. They felt their children had gained many skills and thoroughly enjoyed being part of the project. They hoped it could continue.

Though there was little time to evaluate with the young people afterwards, they appeared very pleased with their performance and with the experience of the whole project.

Allenbourn

All participants gave up a Saturday after the end of the summer term to come and 'dress rehearse' their scene on site (at the open air Forest Garden, Wimborne) before performing alongside WCT at 5pm and 6 pm to audiences ranging of around 30 at each (the maximum we could safely fit in).

As usual, the children were extremely well behaved and very motivated. All had learnt their lines perfectly and showed great powers of concentration and focus throughout. They said how excited they were to be in a 'proper play' and one in such 'an exciting setting', very different from the school hall.

They were very focused throughout the performance, keeping quiet as required 'offstage' and hiding behind the hill at the end. Everyone was impressed by their ensemble acting and their performing skills.

Audience Responses

Questionnaires were distributed to all audience members at each performance. Responses were extremely positive about the children's work and the way it integrated with the rest of the performance.

Audiences were very impressed by the way in which the children were fully immersed in their roles and in the special forest environment in which they were performing.

Parents also shared changes they had observed in their children through the duration of the project. One mother said her son, who is dyspraxic, had “grown in confidence enormously” over the weeks and had really enjoyed himself. In fact, he took on an important role in the drama and carried it off with aplomb.

Conclusions and Developments

Parents and staff at all three schools were all enthusiastic about the overall project and the significant opportunities it had given their children/students, both personally and socially.

They are keen to see the project continue in the future. The Headteacher of St. Michael’s Middle School said the partnership between his school and the Special Needs School had been very important. He is now determined to build on it in the future.

WCT were also very pleased with how the project had gone and would like to see it go further next academic year.