

The Monkey King : An Arts Based Inclusion Project



Background

As a result of an arts-based project it has been possible to demonstrate how, through working in partnership, mainstream and residential special school pupils have been able to work and learn alongside each other.

The arts-based project took the form of a musical performance developed over a two year period and based upon the tale of The Monkey King, an ancient story from Ceylon. The project involved children and staff from Sunfield (a residential special school for children between the ages of 7 and 19 who have severe and complex learning difficulties including autistic spectrum disorders), children and staff from a local mainstream middle school and professionals from The Open Theatre Company and The Shysters Theatre Company in Coventry (both for actors with learning disabilities). The project culminated in a major theatre production presented at the Patrick Centre in the Hippodrome, Birmingham, attracting large audiences at each of its five performances.

The overall main aim of the collaboration was to create an enriching and self-extending experience for Sunfield students and to allow their abilities to be recognised and celebrated alongside those of their mainstream peers. It was envisaged that research based upon this project would enable us disseminate the elements of the collaboration which made it successful, so that other people to envisage success in similar projects.

The aim of the project:

- to find out what is important in creating a fun and collaborative relationship between mainstream and special school teachers and pupils.
- to find out how mainstream pupils' perceptions of disability change through an inclusion project

Method

Our research aims throughout the project were to evaluate the mechanisms which were important in enabling students, both with and without disabilities, to work collaboratively on an arts based project and to achieve a greater understanding of what it means to work inclusively.

Within our evaluation of the project we particularly focused upon:

- how perceptions held by mainstream pupils changed as a result of working alongside peers with Autism and severe and complex learning difficulties
- what we learnt about how inclusion can work

Phase One: Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the mainstream pupils, within their own school. Pupils had been working on the project at this stage for approximately fourteen months. We wanted to find out to what extent mainstream pupils perceptions of, and attitudes towards, children with severe and complex learning difficulties altered as a result of working collaboratively.

Phase Two: Once the collection of data from the initial interviews had been completed and the project concluded, we revisited the mainstream children to find out what they thought had been important in facilitating a change in their initially disabling perceptions and their ideas about what would enable future inclusion project to succeed.

Summary of main findings:

- working together is fun and develops new skills & perceptions
- understanding that working with children with severe & complex learning needs is challenging for both teachers and pupils.
- teachers need to know how to prepare themselves & their pupils
- both mainstream and special schools need to negotiate a mutual understanding of commitment to inclusion projects

Pupil and teacher outcomes:

- mainstream pupils and teachers need to prepare before working on an inclusion project
- mainstream teachers need to develop a supportive framework for their pupils
- mainstream teachers need to “get stuck in” and work alongside their pupils

- mainstream and special school teachers and pupils need to negotiate mutual expectations
- mainstream pupils views of disability change through working with disabled peers
- all pupils are able to develop new skills through inclusion projects which have good role models, good discussion and sustained contact throughout the project

What did mainstream pupils have to say about children with disabilities before they worked together?

'Sometimes I didn't see them as people'

'I thought they were different and I was scared to touch them...I thought I may get what they get if I touch them'

'I didn't know how to approach them – I was apprehensive – didn't know what to expect from them'

And after the project.....

'It was like looking through a glass window but to interact meant I was able to become friends with them'

'We saw how the Sunfield people worked with them and put it together with how we would do things – it was like child to child bonding'

'They're normal – you see past the disability and don't just judge them by that'

Publications:

- **Whitehurst, T & Howells, A (2006) "When something is different people fear it" – mainstream children's perceptions of an arts-based inclusion project"** British Journal of Support for Learning, 21, (1) 40 – 44
- **Whitehurst, T (in press) "Liberating Silent Voices : Perspectives of children with profound & complex learning needs on inclusion"**. British Journal of Learning Disabilities

For Further Information please contact:

Sunfield Research Institute

Tel : 01562 881320

Web: www.sunfield.org.uk

Email: teresaw@sunfield.org.uk