



Catholic Association for Racial Justice, Liverpool

Drama Activity at St Hugh's Roman Catholic Primary School

'Do you (Christians, Muslims, Jews) do that as well?'

Introduction

The CARJ group in Liverpool decided it would be interesting to develop its cultural activities further in schools where musical sessions had already taken place. The idea of setting up a pilot drama programme in a chosen primary school took shape. In 2017 the group applied for and was awarded £350 from the Austin Smith fund to run activities in the Toxteth or Picton Wards of the city where Fr Austin had worked for much of his life.

Contact was made with Collective Encounters for Social Change Theatre Company which is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation based in Liverpool. Mandy Redvers-Rowe, an experienced, blind, community artist from Collective Encounters, was nominated by Collective Encounters to deliver the course. Plans began in earnest when it was decided to allocate a further £350 from CARJ Liverpool resources as matched funding. A teacher from St Hugh's School (Tom Mair) plus a member of the CARJ group (Angela Wylie) agreed to work alongside Mandy (and her guide dog). St Hugh's was chosen to host this pilot project in Spring 2018.

The Project

There were five sessions followed by performances. Each session was to take one hour after school starting on 19th February 2018 and ending in the week before Easter.. Sixteen children from years 3, 4, 5 and 6 volunteered to take part. These included boys and girls (including several sibling groups) from Britain, the Yemen, Syria, Ethiopia, the Czech Republic, India, Iraq, Jamaica and Sierra Leone.

The brief was designed to build up confidence through games while exploring processes which could be used in a final performance. Themes which were

developed clearly reflected CARJ's aims. A large, light 'WOW ROOM' was found for the activities with music and sound equipment to hand. As this was an informal setting it lent itself to freedom of movement and expression.

After the first session, when name games were played, the children were encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas. By putting the focus totally on them all nerves soon vanished which was reflected in the noise level! Two children decided they did not want to continue after the second session. Everyone else became even more enthusiastic as ideas flowed easily and freely.

Initially the overarching theme of FAITH was chosen to be the central focus of the performance. Developing this through discussion and creating images took more time than expected and at times it was hard to see how the final shape would emerge. Gradually the idea of exploring how different faiths celebrate their special festivals not only allowed simple, vibrant images to be built up but it also brought the children together to recognize how similar different faiths actually are. Conversation around this was a very important aspect of the later sessions. Both their own art work and simple props brought everything together for them to use in the final performances; by using props they found it easier to take part as everyone was doing the same thing together. Time raced by especially with the art work which they all loved. Thankfully, Tom Mair, the teacher, was used to using the specialist sound equipment in the 'WOW ROOM' and backed up all the activities extremely well. His knowledge of the children and professional teacher expertise was also a bonus; his was a calming voice! The presence of older siblings in the group was also a considerable help in this respect.

The Performances

Planning the five final performances (one to each year group) took extra time as the weekly sessions were all too short. Mandy felt that having to do more work away from the children was unavoidable. On reflection this was no bad thing as attention spans can be short, especially with the younger children. However, the final performances focusing on CELEBRATION were miraculously pulled into shape. All the children had a role in the performance with 12 performing and 2 supporting technically the music with Tom Mair.



At the start of the project some said that their biggest fear was acting in front of people. Mandy's constant reassurance that they only had to do what was comfortable for them certainly worked as they confidently played the stage and audience for the five performances they did (one to each school year group) on the final day. There were certainly natural performers within the group who could easily have kept going beyond the five minute performance slots. Everyone helped and supported each other with energy and confidence.

Reflection

On reflection it is clear that this experience could lead to many more such projects in the future. Clearly time was a limiting factor but it has been discussed that to make each session longer would be too tiring for the younger children after a day in school. Perhaps adding one more session would be preferable. Maybe reducing some of the games' time would give more planning space earlier in the course but then this may throw the harmonising of the group off balance which was very strong on this occasion.



Working across age groups was identified as a very positive influence on both the younger and the older children and of course the working together of children from a wide range of religions leading to quotes such as 'Oh you do that as well when you celebrate your festivals' referring to the use of fireworks, sweets and money by different religions.

Whether to develop this project into one which lasts for a whole term or a year in one school was discussed. It was felt that 'small quick hits' across a larger number of children and schools would have more impact. However the professional development opportunities offered to the school teacher by working alongside the drama specialist from Collective Encounters should not be dismissed.

Another consideration was whether the use of a specialist Drama Company (Collective Encounters and its associated costs of £700) was to be preferred to a cheaper alternative using less expensive drama teachers since the latter would allow CARJ and Austin Smith funding to impact on a larger number of pupils.

Conclusion

Overall the pilot can be seen as a huge success for everyone involved and hopefully more can be planned for the future.

Angela Wylie, Catholic Association for Racial Justice, Liverpool. May 2018

