Think arts and science can’t mix? Think again!

When a visual artist takes their skills into the classroom, teachers and children have the best chance to learn in a new and creative way, Betti Copperwood explains.

For more than two years now, I’ve been working with the children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at Rosehill school in Nottingham to explore how a creative curriculum that meets the diverse needs of students can be developed and sustained. This has also involved working closely with school staff to develop their skills and understanding.

Rosehill’s investigation of the creative curriculum was kick-started by a professional development day for all school staff this day helped them recognise ‘creative moments’ and encouraged them to look for such moments in their teaching. Sculptor Steve Pool, who helped deliver the development day says, ‘The input of artists helped build the confidence of staff to take risks and make the most of the opportunities creative activities offered. It also helped me recognise what a measured risk might be, especially in the context of working with young people with diverse learning needs, as this was my first experience of working with a special school. I realised that every child could take something valuable away from them from participating in a creative experience.’

Steve and I then began to work with school staff to devise a programme of activities to tie in with Science Week. They wanted to draw on the work that had already taken place, and also recognised that the trust had built between the school’s staff and pupils would allow them to experiment and take more risks.

Rosehill is fortunate in having an annexe which has become a dedicated space for creative activities. It is a studio, rather than a classroom, and the different rooms mean that it can not only be used for messy and energetic activities, but also be quiet and contemplative – in other words, a space where anything can happen.

It was decided that the focus for the Science Week project would be an exploration of the nature of light – in both light and darkened, and in open and enclosed spaces. Smoke and mirrors were used to reveal and change beams of light, and children made personalised light boxes. Other equipment included torches, illuminated screens, projections and video. The activities were varied to respond to the diversity of the children’s needs and interests, for example, the mirrors stimulated some children, while others were uncomfortable with them. It also enabled us to move on if a pupil became over-preoccupied with one particular activity, which can be a feature of ASD. For this reason, adults worked with children on a one-to-one basis, to support individual learning needs, manage any anxieties, and help guide children through the activities, essential where many are non-verbal.

The project also demonstrated how assumptions about children’s learning are being challenged through creative activities, especially with children whose level of understanding or ability may not be immediately visible externally. In science Week, assessment is often made by observing pupils experiencing and interacting, for example, seeing a child notice how a light beam moves and is changed by other objects. School staff found they changed their expectations of pupils’ ability and understanding by seeing them work in a different context, and respond to the different approaches to learning offered by artists. The project has also generated ideas and resources that staff can use with pupils in future for learning across the whole curriculum.

Steve feels that experiential learning is more likely to enable learners to transfer knowledge to other situations, as it can help develop creative thinking through a process of practical exploration and investigation. This ‘what happens if…’ approach also leads artists and teachers to review and reflect on their practice, and perhaps demonstrates a meeting point of artistic and scientific practice. Steve and I agree that the ‘collaborative’ process of exploration demonstrated by this project has enabled them to develop their own practice and generate new ideas.

We also feel that there might be lessons to be learnt for how supposedly ‘difficult’ children can access and benefit from creative learning opportunities in any school. Certainly the success of this approach in Rosehill is recognised beyond the school. In their recent OFSTED report, the school was praised for “the sharing of skills between [creative] partners and school staff” with the result that “unprecedented interaction has been observed with individual pupils.”

The programme of activities, essential where many are non-verbal, was also feed-forwarded by the trust I’d built up between the school’s staff and pupils. This has also involved working closely with school staff to develop their skills and understanding.

Betti Copperwood
Independent artist

**What is Creative Partnerships?**

Creative Partnerships is a government-funded programme delivered through Arts Council England, that aims to give schoolchildren in deprived areas throughout England the opportunity to develop creativity in learning, and participate in cultural activities.

Its vision is based on developing long-term partnerships between schools and cultural and creative organisations, these include architects, theatre and dance companies, historic buildings, museums and online. During the Sixteen Phase One partnerships were established in July 2002 as an initial pilot for the programme. The programme was then extended to cover 36 areas, which are currently being rolled out.

The programme is funded through the DCMS (with some additional funds from the ONS) and delivered by Arts Council England. Funding for the programme is currently confirmed until 2008.

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