



SEND SCHOOLS PROJECT RESOURCE



**A Reflection
Toolkit for
Teachers &
Dance Artists**

**Case Study –
James Brindley Academy
(10-week project)**



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CONTEXT

SEND means Special Education Needs and Disabilities and is a term for children & young people in schools who have learning difficulties or disabilities.

What was the project and why?

James Brindley approached FABRIC after a Birmingham Arts School conference, where FABRIC was advocating for more dance delivery in all schools, including SEND. The project was initially 6 weeks and was extended to run for 10 weeks.

Why did we want to do a information resource on the project?

Not enough SEND schools programme deliver dance and not enough dance artists feel confident to work in SEND schools. We hope that this resource can encourage both parties to include dance in their activity and give the artists confidence to deliver in schools.

What was delivered?

Weekly two hours dance sessions during the schools 'Wellbeing Wednesday' activity slot. We worked with up to 8 young people aged 11 to 16 (KS3 and KS4), with various access needs connected to anxiety and emotional behaviour. There were no set groups and the young people often changed each week. The focus of the sessions were to improve confidence, self-expression and learn to work together as a group to create work.

FABRIC

This work is important to FABRIC because of the benefits it has on young disabled people being exposed to the arts. Seeing a positive impact on their well-being, dedication and confidence. FABRIC supports D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent dance artists in their artistic careers and acknowledges the importance of introducing dance in early education and school settings.

REFLECTIONS FROM THOSE INVOLVED

It's really valuable to emotionally regulate ourselves as leaders/creatives when working in school/community settings. This felt particularly important when working with vulnerable young people who were quite anxious to participate. Slowing down and centering yourself before the session increases presence and your ability to read the room/your participants' needs.

If the session plan you've created isn't working, don't be afraid to throw this out the window! Being flexible and adaptive is key to creating an enjoyable session for all. If there is a task that the group is gelling with/enjoying, how can this now expand to different levels? Can it work in groups or solo? Can you empower an individual to add an extra layer? This is helpful to create a common ground or develop familiar language to use throughout the series.

My practice is heavily play focused and collaborative, I rarely bring choreography into a session as I use games to create movement as an ensemble. Through this process, I found it helpful to have some pre-planned choreography to create a small safety net for participants. At points in the choreography I'd leave a count of 8 or a count of 4 to encourage individual input. This was much more effective as it helped to find a flow and removed pressure from participants.

Jess Barber
(Lead Dance Artist)



Photo by Emma Jones

Emma Ford (Support Worker)



Photo by Emma Ford

Grounding yourself before each session through mindful meditation or breathing exercises is essential in order to be open, creative and responsive to the needs in the room.

The success of a group relies on having an open line of communication between artists, school decision makers and supporting staff, all working together. It's also vital to engage with the supporting teaching assistants as they know the young people best, what will and won't work, and what is normal or unusual behaviour.

PARTICIPANTS FEEDBACK

**"I FEEL MORE
CONFIDENT IN
MY ABILITIES"**

**"I HAVE ENJOYED
MAKING MY OWN
DANCE MOVES"**

**"I FIND LEARNING
CHOREOGRAPHY
EXCITING"**

WHERE TO START WITH PLANNING?

1

Logistics

- Who is your main point of contact in the school and will they be in the session with you? Sometimes the person who has booked you may not be the person on the ground delivering - understanding the school's line of communication is key to knowing what's happening.
- What space will you be in? Are you able to access this before the session starts?
- Who are the students and what are their access needs? What are their ages? Will it be the same students each week or different?
- What information have the students been given? Do they know what to wear and bring?
- Who is the delivery team – dance artist, support worker, teaching assistant, carers? Will the same teacher be supporting each week?
- Has a creative theme/idea been set by the school? If so, how might you explore this? If not, what are the main aims of the sessions? Could you take a few options into the first session and give participants the choice? Have games to fall back on.
- Have appropriate paperwork ready (bring your DBS certificate with you) and understand the responsibility matrix for safeguarding and first aid in the room.

Mindset

2

- What is the right attitude? Always be open to new pathways and be prepared to change course. Think about mindful meditation and breathing techniques, or whatever you need to feel centered. In order to work with other people you need to feel okay in yourself and know that whatever happens, it is not a reflection on your teaching.
- Remember not to take things personally. These students will be coming into the space, bringing with them all their emotions from their own lives, including family dynamics, peer relationships, school pressures and hormonal changes. You can only do your best in the time you have with them.
- Acknowledge the difference of working in a school vs working with a community group that have signed up because they want to be there and dance - it's a different skill set to lead people that don't want to dance, so be mindful of this in your preparation.

3

Creating a Safe Environment

- Ice Breakers/Games - having a menu of non dance games is invaluable to getting young people involved, especially during teenage years when outside perspective and influence is present. We played 'The Witch' chair game, 'The Clown' object game and 'Movement Attack' in regular sessions. We let the students choose which game they'd like to start the session with, empowering decision making.
- Room free from disruptions - ensuring that the space isn't a walkway for people to pass through, this could sometimes leave young people feeling nervous/a little on edge.
- Accept and acknowledge all offerings made however seemingly small - it may be a big step for some of the participants.
- Wherever possible, all people in the room actively take part. Spectators make people feel uneasy and less likely to join in creatively. However, acknowledge that for some, simply being in the room may be a challenge. It is important to communicate with TA's/teacher's to understand who may need extra time to adjust and allow for this.
- Be consistent. Do what you say you are going to do and if this changes explain to the group why you are changing.
- Be responsive. Allow time for young people to voice concerns and opinions and use this knowledge to shape how you move the session forward.

4

Accepting Change

- Keep communication open to find solutions to necessary changes.
- Use your creative toolbox, switch things up if the mood or reaction feels off. Some things will work one day but not on others.
- Last minute changes in venue. Be adaptive and stay positive. Students may feel more comfortable in some spaces than others, allow for this change and adapt activities to suit.
- Feedback if a change is not for the better. The school is there to provide a safe and creative environment so if its not working, say so.

Co-creation

5

- What do the students want to do? Listen to young peoples feedback and identify next steps. **Example:** In this project a couple of students wanted to learn more set and taught choreography. Jess prepared some choreography to popular music, and the young people then added their own movements on top.
- How are you empowering confidence in the students?
 1. Use the warm-up to encourage students to input their own movements and have their say.
 2. Working in smaller groups or partner work is less overwhelming and gives quieter students an opportunity to have a voice and offer ideas.
 3. Leaving gaps in led choreography with 'open suggestions' as to what the next steps could be. Praise and utilise all contributions.

WRAP UP + NEXT STEPS

Evaluation & Wrap Up

- When working with another support worker / dance assistant, make time to debrief at the end of each session. If you are a lone worker then debrief with yourself the successes, challenges and identify next steps. Keep a journal.
- It is important to have a considered soft exit that prepares the participants for the ending.
- Use the knowledge in the room- staff that know young people well. Ask for their feedback and insights.
- Use creative reflective tools for participants that are low pressure. Ask useful questions in a way that takes the pressure off writing or speaking too much. **Examples:**
 1. Post notes for thoughts that can be written or drawn.
 2. Posters with written thoughts already on it that young people can stick sticker dots on to agree with the statements they find true indicating personal growth.
 3. Using emoji faces for participants to choose how they felt before and after sessions.
- Are there any students who would be interested in further dance opportunities? What outside classes are there? Run your ideas via the teacher first as there may be logistical, travel and financial barriers to consider. Signpost these other opportunities if appropriate.

FINAL TAKEAWAYS

Working with young people that do not want to engage?

- Find ways to include them. Can they assist with music choices? Do they have choreographic ideas about what could happen next? If they prefer to sit down, how can you adapt choreography so that they can be included?
- Props are amazing ways to encourage movement potential as it takes the focus off the individual and onto the object, this can encourage more ambitious shapes. Over a few sessions you can then take away the prop and rehearse without - gently encouraging confidence in body/ability.
- If people are persistently not engaging or becoming disruptive use the knowledge of the staff in the room to determine whether it is the right activity for them. Remember that in order to create a safe space spectators will make the participants feel watched and less likely to take part creatively. The Teaching Assistant in the room can help if a young person becomes disengaged and know what the individual needs to feel safe.

What do you wish you knew before going into an SEND context?

- How unpredictable the sessions can be. In a SEND context, it can be hard to predict who will turn up, and how those that do turn up will engage that day.
- More understanding of the logistics of the school and how many variables need to align for the session to take place. Last minute changes occur often due to the nature of the work and it's important to be flexible.
- If a project involves several schools or bases, there is a completely different atmosphere, as students don't always know each other and are reluctant to be creative in front of strangers.
- Have more confidence that by being adaptable, responsive and fun, you will be able to lead anything with success.