

PIRATES OF THE IMAGINATION

1. PREPARATION/PLANNING

1.1 I had fourteen days to:-

- Contact the schools to inform them that the project was happening.
- Set up a timetable for the schools to include times of visits and times of actual workshop days.
- Plan and structure the workshop.
- Find and work with a designer/maker and organise the art work.
- Compile a collection of sensory props and materials.

1.2 The visits to the schools happened rather late on in the preparation period which meant that when I did visit I had already established an overall view of the workshop and had planned the pre-work without fully taking in the diversity of needs within the six special needs schools of Tower Hamlets.

1.3 The pre-work was focussed on a pirate treasure chest. The chest had six different compartments each creating a different sensory atmosphere and each compartment had a 'real' object in it. The young people thought about each atmosphere, which senses they were using and the different emotions that might be contained within each compartment. I wanted them to make up stories using the chest as a stimulus. The real objects were to eventually relate to a story I would tell and as the story unfolded I would need the help of these various objects thus the young people would have an investment in the story as they were the owners of the needed objects.

1.4 The second aspect of my visits consisted of 'interviews and photos', to create a programme with a photo and a short autobiography of each person. This acted as a two part process:-

- (i) I could spend time building relationships with the young people individually, finding out their likes and dislikes.
- (ii) They could operate without pressure from their peers, and therefore more honestly.

2. THE SCHOOLS

2.1 Beatrice Tate - SLD (Severe Learning Disabilities)

The staff were very supportive of the project from the start and were very keen that I spend as much time in school getting to know the young people and their individual needs. I gave the class a general idea of the workshop, but at the time I had not prepared any visual/sensory backup to support the ideas. Instead of verbal interviews I set up the photo session to play around with facial expressions and different feelings.

The workshop, for it to be accessible for the above young people needed to be as sensorily-based as possible and to include elements of repetition.

2.2 Phoenix School - Delicate/Moderate Learning Disabilities (MLD)/Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties (EBD).

My contact, a part-time music teacher chose the young people from various classes. All people chosen had a particular interest in drama and music.

The interviews/photos did not happen on a one to one basis as I was given the whole group for the afternoon and no staff support*. I got everyone in role as an interviewer/reporter and we took it in turns to interview each other. This worked to a certain extent but peer pressure prevented people from enjoying talking about themselves.

The workshop needed to address their listening skills and find ways for them to work as a team, learning how to negotiate, give and take instructions and how to work visually as well as verbally.

*This school did not offer any staff support any time during the project.

2.3 Bromley Hal 1- Physical Disabilities/MLD.

The staff were very supportive of the project from the start and storytelling is strongly encouraged to get the young people to use their imaginations both on paper and verbally.

The interview session was on a one to one basis and it proved to be very informative, each person enjoying having the space to talk about themselves. Those who had some difficulty communicating grew in confidence verbally, as there was the time to think and communicate responses.

- a balance between using words and actions.
- sensory and repetitive aspects to be included.

2.4 Templars Boy's School - MLD/EBD

Staff support in this school depended on who was teaching the class at the time of my visits. All boys showed a keen interest in drama and welcomed a distraction from their normal class! The interviews were done on a one to one basis which was essential as peer pressure to say and do the right thing was very prevalent. Each boy started the interview with elements of bravado then as time went on we discussed the nature of bullying, fighting, storytelling and other issues. They liked having that time to be themselves and to be taken seriously by an adult not linked with the school.

The workshop as it was would not challenge these boys enough. They needed to explore their violence, aggression and anger as well as the opposites of those feelings. The workshop felt "too young". They needed to be given the responsibility of making the rules and setting the agenda to create a working environment based on teamwork, listening to each other and finding ways to channel their collective aggression positively.

2.5 Weaver's Field Boy's School - EBD.

The staff were very supportive and anxious. They work in an atmosphere of latent violence and aggression which can and does explode without due provocation. The interviews were successful in the same way they were at Templars School. The general feel of this school presented a very different atmosphere and a different challenge in that these boys have been thrown out of mainstream school and deemed 'impossible'. My feelings about the workshop were the same as I felt for Templars, including ways of working around the issue of self respect and trust.

2.6 Grenfell School - MLD/EBD.

The staff were very supportive and the core teacher gave me lots of advice about the nature and needs of her class. The interview was a group

event, everyone chipping in and arguing but it gave me a feel of the group as a whole and we had time to talk about stories and about ways of communicating.

2.7 The six schools ideally needed six tailor-made workshops to meet all the various needs. Time would not permit this so I had to settle for two different workshops both focussing on the same themes.

3. The Rehearsal period.

3.1 The first three mornings were spent in school delievering the treasure chest and explaining the pre work. The groups were introduced to Sandra and Andy. The chest was well received at all schools except Weaver's Field where staff did not give us the time to explain things and this resulted in the chest being removed from the group and in us being ushered out fairly quickly.

3.2 The rest of the time was spent:-

- Explaining the process so far and the reasons for two different workshops.
- Concentrating on the workshop plans adding a range of storytelling exercises suitable for both workshops.
- The story I was to tell was eliminated in order to concentrate on the stories we hoped would come out of the pre-work (thus the purpose of the 'real' objects became rather vague).
- Collecting materials to be used for the enviroment building.

3.3 This period was not structured effectively. Practical work should have been included such as :-

- Building environments to become familiar with the materials we had.
- Exercises playing with verbal and non verbal ways of running a workshop.
- Developing skills enabling us to address and work with the very special needs of the young people, finding different ways of approaching and setting up exercises and how to work with repetition.

3.4 The sensory based workshop was primarily for Beatrice Tate, Bromley Hall and Grenfell. The other was for Weaver's Field, Templars and Phoenix. Each workshop contained elements of both and each concentrated on using the imagination and the exploration of emotions through storytelling.

4. The workshops

4.1 (see teachers evaluation sheets)

4.2 In each school (with the exception of Templars and Weaver's Field who were cancelled owing to exhaustion) the first morning session was always the hardest trying to gain the focus of the group and for them to understand the value of warm up games. However once we were focused on the treasure chest and had began the actual storytelling and enviroment building the sense of the workshop fell into place.

The work enabled the young people to use their imaginations both verbally and visually. The building of the 'set' challenged their artistic abilities, their teamwork and negotiation skills.

The performance aspect allowed them to be proud of what they had achieved and gave them time to reflect on how much they had done in less than seven hours.

4.3 We were slightly more prescriptive at Beatrice Tate creating the story from an improvisation under the parachute. The environment building was a case of us building around the young people drawing attention to the textures of the fabrics, to the use of sound to create atmosphere and to create a constant commentary both verbal and visual within the space to keep the focus.

5. Practical problems

5.1 I should not have been working with actors who were physically and mentally exhausted.

5.2 It is not benificial to 'teach' such a workshop and then 'do it'. The

process should be more organic and collective. It would have benefited the actors to have some input in the initial planning of the project prior to my involvement.

5.3 Line management and administration support from the company would have helped to use the planning time more effectively. If the above support had been in place I would have discussed the possibility of working only with young people from SLD and MLD schools as my own experience of working in EBD schools is very limited.

5.4 It is a mistake to assume that all people in special needs education have learning disabilities.

5.5 Contact must be kept with the EBD schools as these young people have been let down by adults all their lives and by not doing the work we let them down.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 The company must think carefully about their policy on special needs work and to assess their commitment to this area of work. This means:

- Giving the work proper support in terms of value and status.
- Understanding the differences between SLD,MLD and EBD.
- Allowing realistic timescales for planning taking into consideration the importance of meeting the young people prior to the actual workshops.
- Time should be allocated for training to explore the specialised skills needed in this variable/diverse area of work.
- A pool of skilled special needs arts workers would be worthwhile collating.
- Money should be allocated to buy sensory equipment.
- The company should remain in contact with the schools and to keep in touch with those young people who are being integrated into mainstream schools. Pupils from Bromley Hall are being integrated with pupils from Grenfell who will go to Templars.
- Read "Setting The Scene" by Chris Vine for in depth information on

LMS,National Curriculum in special schools and the new integration policies.

7. Proposed Project.

7.1 To work over a long period of time with Weavers Field and Templars developing the young people's workshop skills and then devising a workshop together to take to Beatrice Tate school.