



# **Social Justice and Creative Arts Learning in Schools**



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Responding to the social injustices brought into sharp contrast by the year 2020, Bow Arts embarked on an action-research project: working with schools and artists to explore how arts learning could tackle some of the challenges that our children and young people were facing during a global pandemic and a necessary resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

We reached out to schools to find out how children and their learning had been impacted by recent global events, before recruiting artists with teaching expertise and lived experience of the issues in focus. We embedded a research and development phase that gave us time to understand the injustices pupils were facing and learn from each other before embarking on projects.

Over the two academic years we collaborated, we partnered five artists with as many schools to train teachers and develop and deliver projects together. This exhibition features outcomes created by the children and young people throughout the process.

This programme was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

## Sebright Primary School, Hackney

### with Annie Nicholson aka The Fandangoe Kid

The pilot saw Annie work with Year 6 students at Sebright on a project designed to teach them the term 'Social Justice' and related concepts of equity, allyship and empathy. They explored these through creative activities such as drawing where emotions are felt in the body and drawing feelings as they listen to a story of injustice.

Working in sketchbooks, children explored different art media including textiles, embroidery and paint. The model of the sessions provided a valuable format for exploring issues, based on undertaking an artistic task and then opening a space for dialogue into the topics explored. The aim of the legacy project was to design and embed a whole-school social justice project into the curriculum on a long-term basis. A different theme linked to social justice was designated to each year group, so that children will build up knowledge as they move up the school such as equity/inequity, allyship and empathy.

The project started with Annie leading on CPDs with teachers from Early Years to Year 3, introducing them to their theme and how she would creatively explore this theme through art activities. Teachers were also given a resource to lead the project with their classes independently.

Annie then worked with classes in Year 4, 5 and 6 directly. Classes experimented with painting on textiles, collage and t-shirt design, all linked to their class's social justice theme. The children discovered how they could make their voices heard using textiles, photography and explorations of typography.

There was a focus on students learning the meaning of key terms, sharing their ideas and communicating with their peers. Individual and collective tasks stimulated rich discussions amongst pupils about being compassionate towards others and their feelings and particular situations.

The school now have a curriculum resource to use annually, and a striking mural in the school designed by Annie, which gives children a reminder of some of the concepts explored in their workshops: togetherness and allyship.



we stand

together.

life

the



## Riverside Secondary School, Barking with Thomas Harvey – MMRMS Studio

The initial project saw Thomas work with sixteen Year 8 students to think about how we empower ourselves to use fashion for positive impact, drawing on themes of race and gender. Each student was given a second-hand lab coat to upcycle into a new garment. Using a local maker space, the fashion designer introduced students to industry grade equipment and tools and the basics of making an item of clothing.

Students combined their lab coats with donated and recycled fabric to create a new item of clothing, including jackets, skirts and shirts. Working with professional equipment was a highlight for the pupils. A significant outcome of the project was how it inspired pupils, the majority who had never sewn before, to continue to improve their technical skills in this area.

Building on pilot project, the focus for the legacy project remained on giving students practical fashion design and making skills they do not usually learn in school. Year 10 Art and Design students put themselves forward for the project, and the work produced will contribute to their GCSE coursework portfolio.

The project aimed to build on the student's theme of 'Identity' in two ways: firstly, the item of clothing they were to make was a blazer - a symbol of collective identity both in terms of school and the workplace. Secondly, the students were asked to design the decoration and patterns on the blazer to reflect something about their personal identity. The skills were linked to professional fashion industry, with students exploring different ways to print on textiles, block printing and screen printing, and how to pattern cut. They then learnt how to sew their blazers, again utilizing a local maker space.

Thomas felt that both dialogue and sketchbooks were integral parts of the process. Students now have skills they didn't have previously, with some saying they have started to use the sewing machines of family members at home. The school now have a bank of sewing machines for students to use, with some bespoke 'How To' resources designed for them by Thomas.



## Morningside Primary School, Hackney with Dunya Kalantery

Morningside Primary School identified Year 3 as the form to work with due to the impact of covid lockdowns and home learning on this group. Dunya Kalantery worked with small group under the title 'What is my learning magic?' to build independence and confidence in learning.

Through creative making activities and discussion, children explored their learning style, or learning 'magic', and how habits and rituals can support them. The project explored the concept of amulets/votives, and rituals around objects. They worked with clay and its material properties while taking part in discussions, and in the second workshop the children went on a guided walk which encouraged them to explore their local area and collect objects from their environment, which formed the basis of discussions and storytelling. The children then created their own personal amulets using silver clay, with each child then enlivening their fired amulet with a unique personal ritual.

For the longer project, we explored how process-focused art activities which allow for discussion can develop a greater sense of community at school. Dunya's approach was based on engaging two classes of Year 3 pupils in artistic process and letting conversations unfold organically. The children from one class made coil bowls, whilst the other class cooked a meal of chicken, vegetable patties, rice and salad with the school cook, Awa, for them and their parents/carers. The bowls served as a point of connection with and between pupils in both classes.

Involving parents was key to fostering this greater sense of community within the school. Parents were invited to an after-school session where they collaborated with their children to make the bowls; parents were also guests at the community meal.





## Elfrida Primary School, Lewisham with Laurie Fitzgerald

Initially, Elfrida Primary highlighted issues for their Year 3 children who had missed large amounts of school due to lockdown, where lack of contact with peers had caused relationships to suffer. The school noted that this group had challenges with emotional regulation and struggled to express feelings in a positive way. The project also sought to introduce children to quality art materials that they had not had access to previously due to school budget limitations.

Laurie Fitzgerald used mark-making exercises and exploration of art materials as process-led activities for the children to explore their emotions. Following on from the pilot, Laurie worked with a Year 3 and Year 5 class to explore how arts-based learning can support the development of children's emotional literacy. The project also aimed to explore how this learning could support trauma relief, particularly at a time of economic crisis.

Laurie focused primarily on working with charcoal, pastels, and paint through non-figurative approaches, in addition to using crafts. Poster-making led by protest messages, 'Let it Go Pillows' and affirmation mirrors were some of the vehicles developed to encourage pupils to process the themes.

The artist's non-figurative practical exercises were successful in encouraging pupils to think through their feelings; they served as a means for pupils to connect with and express their emotions. These exercises also made an impact on the teachers, several of whom noted that it had shifted their perspective about what art can be, and what it can achieve.

Teachers were extremely positive about the CPD (Continuing Professional Development) session and expressed how they had developed new skills as a result that they would use in the future, both as part of their personal and professional practice.

Legacy outcomes include a teacher resource booklet with practical activities set alongside in-depth advice for delivery, and a poster to be used as classroom resource that children can use themselves to emotionally regulate.



# ART TO HELP US EXPRESS OUR EMOTIONS

**IF YOU ARE NOT SURE WHAT YOU FEEL TRY...**

Making an abstract drawing



Are your lines going to be hard or soft? Wobbly or spiky?



Using emotional lines

Painting an emotion creature

Is it a big or small creature? Soft or Scary? What made it feel this way and what could help them feel better?



Doing a mindful body scan

Close your eyes and take some deep breaths. Think about how your feet, knees, tummy, heart and head feel inside

Are some parts tense? Or relaxed? Heavy? Or light? Shaky or steady? Fast or slow?



and drawing a feelings map

**IF YOU KNOW WHAT YOU FEEL AND ARE FEELING TOO MUCH OF IT MAYBE TRY...**

Blowing up some breath balloons!

Hold an imaginary balloon up to your mouth. Breathe in for 3 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds

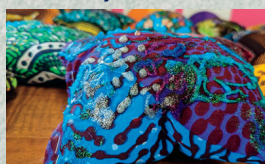


Remember breathing this way can help us to calm down, so blow up as many breath balloons as you need to!

Creating a LET IT GO pillow

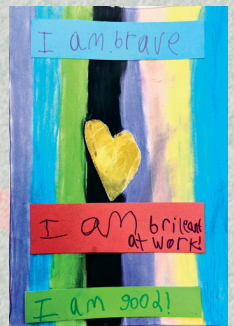
No feeling is bad or wrong but there are better and worse ways to express them especially when we are upset

Rather than hurt ourselves or other people create a pillow you can squeeze, scream into, cry into and relax on, to let a bad day go!



Making an affirmation poster

Affirmations work best when you say them to yourself everyday in the mirror!



I am smart  
I am fun  
I am a good friend  
I can learn anything  
I love myself  
I can be brave

Remind Yourself why you're amazing!

## The Crescent Primary School, Croydon with Tyreis Holder

The Crescent Primary wanted to explore how can we teach self-regulation techniques to create a better classroom atmosphere by improving behaviour and relationships between children. Artist Tyreis Holder intertwined poetry, mindfulness and textiles practice to consider how we build positive communities inside and outside of school.

In the first year the children used the punch needling method to create a collaborative garment that explored the concept of community. The garment was then put on display at school for parents and visitors.

For the second project phase, Tyreis worked with a group of pupils from years 4, 5 and 6 to focus on developing techniques that help to identify, communicate and manage emotions, including looking at the relationships the pupils had with their peers and at home. Tyreis' goal was to equip pupils with self-regulation techniques, engage parents in the pupils' artwork and give teachers new techniques to use in the classroom.

Tyreis delivered a CPD session with teachers demonstrating what she would be doing with the children and how staff could implement some of the techniques into their lessons.

This year, the young people have learnt a hands-on take on a traditional technique called latch hook rug making. They explored how they can represent their moods using colour and texture and learnt new ways to communicate by themselves and as a collective.

Individual affirmation artworks and collaborative garments that the children produced were put on public display in Whitgift Shopping Centre in Croydon. We wanted to host the children's art in a space that was accessible and familiar for the families to visit.







# Top Tips for artists delivering projects in schools with a social justice focus

The following top tips have been compiled with the artists who took part in the project.

- Social justice is not a monolith. Socio-political, environmental, and economic problems are interlinked. Therefore be wary of trying to neatly package one topic - be prepared and comfortable with discussions and explorations overlapping. It's about the tools you're giving to the pupils to think through these topics. It's a learning process for everyone involved.
- Social injustice is a structural issue - who gets to speak, what gets to be said etc. Think about the structural changes you can make in practice. What does this look like in terms of facilitating the space?
- Having structured, planned activities is important. However, make sure you create opportunities for the pupils to make their own choices about their work, i.e. selecting materials, colours etc. Provide a scaffold but give pupils the agency to experiment with their own creativity.
- Many pupils are living and breathing the issues surrounding social injustice. Respect that their opinions are coming from an informed place.
- Listen actively to what pupils are saying. Even if you disagree with their response, think about what might be informing their opinion. Respect where they're coming from and their journey in learning to articulate their viewpoints.
- When practising art with pupils, there will be a strong feeling amongst some that they have 'messed up' and want to start again. Frame arts activities as learning processes - encourage them to critically reflect on their piece in a positive way, make improvements, invite them to turn the paper over. Support this way of thinking from the beginning.
- Create space for pupils to discuss and reflect on their needs as the project develops. Include them in conversations regarding the future of project work and how they see the arts developing in their schools.

- You're unlikely to be in a school long enough to get to know the children and their needs fully, so if a member of the class is struggling, don't assume you know how to help. Ask pupils what they need i.e 'how can I help?' Sometimes they will need to speak to their teacher, take a break or need some focused 1-1 help.
- Learn about the school's discipline procedure ahead of commencing work so your classroom management is in line with the school's policy. Ask yourself what you agree with and what you do not agree with within the policy and be transparent with the classroom teacher about your boundaries. Discuss and agree how you will manage situations as they arise.
- Introduce CYP to digital crafts where possible, giving them the opportunity to use tools and platforms familiar to a generation growing up in a digital sphere.
- Exploring social justice themes within participatory settings can be heavy so it's important to look after yourself. Create time and space with another artist, project manager or practitioner to reflect, share ideas and offload.

# Top Tips for cultural organisations delivering arts projects in schools with a social justice focus

The following tips have been compiled by Bow Arts.

- Embedding a research and development stage at the beginning of projects is often expensive, but not doing so can be a missed opportunity. Try your hardest to implement one - it was vital to the success of this programme. A strong research and development phase gave us the opportunity to fully understand school contexts, learn from each other as practitioners and receive speciality training in working with young people facing racism, poverty and trauma. We also had time to set clear lines of enquiry for each project.
- Every project made space for conversation, but artists found some of the classroom discussion challenging. Buy in expert training beforehand. Philosophy for Children (P4C) is a good start.
- Secure dates as far as possible in advance for group R&D. Trying to bring together large numbers of freelance artists and teachers in the same space is a logistical challenge.
- Recruit artists with lived experience of the issues that you are trying to address. They will be well equipped to deliver and will have a true understanding of the challenges children are facing. This ensures authenticity in the exchange.
- Include artist wellbeing support throughout the process. This work will be difficult to deliver - mentally and emotionally.
- Make time for artists to observe the different classes they will be working with before project starts.
- Be clear about expectations for teachers involved. Their time is precious, and they are experiencing many pressures.
- With teachers, aim for fewer emails and more meetings. They are not at computers all day!
- Be prepared for staff turnover in schools. We had to build new relationships as teachers left schools.



- Be flexible to adapt to school timetables and other restrictions. We have to navigate their environment and their specific pupils and ways of working. Create bespoke projects for each setting.
- Strive to get SLT buy-in from the start. Involve them in the planning process. Align your work with school priorities.
- Embed Teacher CPD in your projects. This upskills the teachers not just pupils and leaves a lasting legacy for the school.
- Make time and space for reflection. We delivered the project in multiple stages: a research and development phase to begin, then a 5-day pilot project with reflection time and finally a longer 20-day legacy project. This allowed us to reflect part-way through and implement learning gathered during the process.
- Aim to fully fund the work for schools. They are facing high financial pressures, with some schools are even struggling to buy basic art materials.
- Parental engagement can be difficult – use existing school communication channels, such as ClassDojo or texts to connect with them. Involve them in creative sessions and be clear about the benefits of arts learning.
- Facilitate face-to-face sharing with your facilitators and teachers throughout projects. There wasn't a great participant uptake in online forums. Create spaces for networking amongst the practitioners involved.





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