



For the Best - a participatory arts project

Manuela Beste

Headteacher, Evelina Hospital School, London, UK

Following are excerpts from a report about a year long collaboration between Evelina Children's Hospital School, the Unicorn Theatre, primary schools and artists and performers in London, conceived by artist Mark Storor and produced by educationalist Anna Ledgard. For the Best was largely funded through a Wellcome Trust Arts Award as part of a public engagement strategy to support projects that aim to inform and inspire the public about biomedical science and its social contexts.

The project provided a model of interdisciplinary partnership and collaboration across multiple agencies including a hospital renal unit, a hospital school, a theatre, primary schools, artists, a film maker and performers from a range of disciplines. The project has had a number of profound outcomes for participating children and families, their peers in primary schools, bio-medical and education professionals and the general public audiences for the performance.

Project Activity

From September 2008 Mark Storor worked as artist in residence on the Dialysis Unit with the children, hearing their stories, enabling them to create poems and to make images and entering into a reciprocal creative process with them. A team of artists worked to support the work in the school, bringing animation, sound recording and making skills to give form to the children's ideas.

Along with one of the children from the Unit Mark also devised an imagined journey drawn from images and writing the child had created that were metaphorical representations of his experience of his condition. This journey, named Out of Bounds, included a maze that had to be travelled through without crossing the boundaries, a meeting with a tiger whose fierceness had to be subdued and an impossible jigsaw that had to be completed blindfolded.

Responding to letters sent from this child, children at Worple School and at Charles Dickens School had to travel on the Out of Bounds journey and rise to the challenge of facing difficulties and hardships in collaboration with each other in order to succeed.

A team of 6 performers took part in a 6 week devising and rehearsal process in May 2009 which resulted in the creation of an 80minute piece of theatre for public audiences. The stories of the children in the dialysis unit were the source material for the devising process and, under the guidance of Mark Storor, artists and performers kept to the essence of these stories, going back to the source material all the time, whilst bringing their own experience to it, and making something new and fresh.

The performance of For the Best took place in the Clore studio, corridors and backstage areas of the Unicorn Theatre. It was attended by mixed audiences of adults and children – a total of 2,000. The show received excellent reviews, including a 5 star review in The Guardian, and was pick of the week in Time Out. The performance was accompanied by other events: a post-show talk organized in collaboration with London Arts in Health Forum (attended by 40 delegates); a masterclass for young performers (attended by 15); and a Symposium at City Hall (attended by 90 delegates).



Opening Workshop

Each workshop began with the participants making a drawing of their physical self whilst blindfolded. Translating the sensate experience of the body into a visual image without seeing what is being created provided a safety for those involved by removing the hesitancy that can come with expectations of making a recognisable representation. It also signalled a shift from a focus on the external world to the unique inner landscape of each participant that would deepen as the workshop progressed. The next activity encouraged a shift in language use from discursive to expressive mode. Storer asked participants to identify themselves with objects, landscapes; creatures etc.

As in: *If you were an animal what would you be?*

The responses were personal and private and at no time were any of the participants asked to explain their choices. This shift to expressing self perception through metaphor then provided the source of the visual images in the next stage of the workshop.

Each of the participants then drew round a partner to provide them with a life sized outline of themselves. This outline was then filled with the images created earlier using whatever materials participants chose from the rich array of resources Mark Storer provided.

Evelina Hospital School - The Children's responses

Child J (girl aged 15)

*I am a creative pepper, rich, green, smooth and bright
Belonging to a sisterhood of richly coloured, lushly textured peppers:
red, orange, yellow, green*

*However, slice into my core, and deep
inside my core is dark purple.
My feelings, heartfelt emotion, lies in deep.
I peer into the deep darkness
and recognise a vein of purple jealousy stirring
I push it deeper
Amongst the other tubes
My purple heart core
Although limited make note
Restricted intake – drops
Limited water passes my lips but I am water.
Open, clear, crystal cold, a fountain of reflection
comes to those who gaze into me.
Water holds memory – mix water to substance and
It canchange things
The property like magic*

*I am hospital, my second home,
A home is not always where you might expect it,
I am attached, actually attached,
physically, emotionally, mentally, actually,
dialysis is part of me
I know everyone, my other family,
when you have something of myself is here
People who care for you
You are safe
Something of myself is here*



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Child K (boy aged 16)

I am a cabbage, full, wholesome, tight close, into myself, a whole person.

Compacted, my leaves like a new page open up a little at a time.

The cabbage is like the journey of life, its heart lies deep rooted within the layers.

I am Fire. I have great burning ambitions I always want to aim higher if you start a fire it gradually multiply it keeps catching on if you don't put it out. It is wild unlike the rhythms of the sea. I am like an internal fire that suddenly burst out, sometimes calms and sometime explosive.

I am Sky blue. Sky blue can give people a sense of peace. It offers opportunity, possibilities and hope.

Gazing at sky blue, images appear. A wondering mind can travel from miles and miles and miles.

They say the black hole can suck you in, it represents death but I don't believe the world, life, everything will end easily. There is a point beyond, there is no black hole but there is a room and the room will never be empty. You may enter through one door and not immediately see that there is another one too. When you get used to the dark, you will have the eye to see everything far beyond your imagination.

I am Romance. Music fills my soul and I am drenched in song. Lyrics live in my memories. A song is like a poem, they are about culture, experience and emotion. I understand the lyrics I feel the music, I know the song, but I'm hanging by a thread of desperate longing, waiting for my turn but I haven't experience anything yet...just yet but when it comes my whole body will bust with fireworks shooting through the pores of my skin like a bomb inside my belly, love will explode and my fragile heart beats harder than ever in my life sinking deeper into the world of love. I live through the word the song the melody and harmonies and try to understand other people feelings maybe, just maybe, I could help others to understand too.

The complete evaluation of the project can be viewed at the links below:

http://www.unicorntheatre.com/userfiles/files/forthebest_evaluation.pdf

http://annaedgard.com/wp-content/uploads/forthebest_evaluation.pdf

www.evelina.southwark.sch.uk



(girl aged 12)