

Introduction

This website contains a selection of stories by people from arts organisations across the East Midlands about arts practice with disabled children and young people.

The stories are examples of the tremendous value of the arts to all children and young people, and to the expertise, motivations and values of some of the most progressive arts practitioners in the region. They are intended to represent their work, their contribution to our society, and to help develop inclusive and empowering arts provision for all children and young people.

The stories came from a research project carried out by a team of researchers at the University of Leicester for The Mighty Creatives (TMC) and Attenborough Arts to map contemporary arts policy and practice for disabled children and young people and explore the effects of funding cuts. While times are hard – and undoubtedly getting harder – our research shows that the key resource that the region has is the passion and commitment of its arts practitioners. It is this more than anything else that will sustain this vital form of socially engaged arts practice through difficult times. The stories in the following pages showcase some of the best practices to emerge in the course of the research and we hope that they will provide inspiration.

The full report, written by Dr William Green and Dr Jack Newsinger, is titled **DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: ENGAGEMENT IN ARTS AND CULTURE IN THE EAST MIDLANDS IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESTRAINED RESOURCES** and can be [downloaded from The Mighty Creatives website](#).



County Youth Arts, Mansfield

Society restricts people with disabilities. They have incredible ambitions but aren't given the chance to achieve them. With more focus on their impairments than abilities, it's time perceptions of disabled young people changed. And that's what our ambition is.

We worked with 40 young people from Portland College in Nottinghamshire, all with quite profound physical disabilities, on the project 'Able Orchestra'. Using unique software, the young people were able to create and compose music on iPads before syncing the sounds to compose one big piece.

In their own college environment and working with two or three familiar artists, the young people spent their own time across 10 weeks attending sessions, interacting with each other and learning how to be creative in new, if a bit noisy, ways!

Once the piece began to develop, the work became more intense. Five of the group found the courage to perform their composition in a professional theatre in front of an open audience and a backdrop of digital images created by the rest of the group. It gave them a huge buzz. As far as they were concerned, they were rock stars for the night and had accomplished one of their ambitions. And with a mixture of performers taking part, they were made to feel truly equal. In fact, they enjoyed it so much they began performing regularly.

I'm lucky enough to have witnessed the magic that happened backstage as these young people watched and supported each other's performances – it was quite fantastic.

Instead of being identified by their disabilities, they were appreciated for their abilities. Other children recognised them as real people with names and identities. Given the right opportunities, true friendships are made and differences disappear.

Because of the success of this project, we're now looking to work with an organisation called Orchestras Live. Our ambition is to see disabled young people and their iPads performing with non-disabled, traditional musicians from a local ensemble and members of the BBC Concert Orchestra.

Disabled young people should be able to create music and challenge their peers, as well as the rest of society, to tackle their restrictions and learn the score.



Catalyst Theatre, Northampton

When we looked into the different ways that children with additional needs are assessed in musical progression, we found that the evaluation frameworks being used just didn't quite hit the mark for us and our project, Tunes Together. So we developed our own, and they've formed the basis for everything since: from planning sessions to assessing how the children relate to those around them. We track not only their musical progression but also their wellbeing.

For this project, the children attended ten monthly sessions culminating in a celebration at the local theatre. This year it had a space theme, so we did everything from building rockets to giant, glow-in-the-dark beach-ball stars. For me, there was definitely one star moment.

In May last year, I met a little boy at a one-off session who was only about five years old but suffered from hearing and visual impairment. After introducing him to simple percussion instruments to help him cope with being in a room full of people, his mum signed them both up to our project. They regularly attended sessions, but a week before a scheduled interactive performance, his mum was contemplating not bringing him along because she didn't think he'd cope.

After a really successful final session she changed her mind, and how glad she would be that she did! At one point we invited children onto the stage for a 'party on the moon' and this little lad was in the middle, dancing with me and other children around him – he was actually jumping around so much his hearing aids were hanging off! His mum was on the other side of the room in tears because she couldn't believe what he was doing. It was one of those fantastic moments where you can really see what someone's been able to achieve with your help.

For projects like this, it is of course about the children but it's also about the parents having the confidence to support their children's progression. Just as we track the children's development, we look at what their families are doing too. And as the little boy's mum said in an interview, she's learnt to accept her son and have fun with him. And that's the reason projects like this are successful.

Northampton Music and Performing Arts Trust, Northampton

In the summer holiday, we worked with the local visual impairment team to gather a group of visually impaired young children for a day of communal music making.

The children made little compositions and performed some improvisations. They don't often get the chance to meet each other, so the day was just as much about making friends as making music.

We worked with a disability arts organisation who brought with them two members of the British Power Orchestra. They were visually impaired too, to show the children just what they could achieve.

And that's important because people often don't encourage young disabled people to think about their aspirations. But to see that you can be out there earning a living as a freelance musician – and be visually impaired – that was inspirational to them.

I think one of the most important messages that we all took from the project is that music is an art form that anyone can get involved in. Although the visually impaired musicians use braille to learn and memorise music, they also emphasised the importance of improvising and having creative ideas without needing to refer to notation. And that levels the playing field for everybody, whether you're visually impaired or not, because someone with notation may take just as long to learn a piece as someone without.

The information really flowed between professionals and young people. Our team of musicians also benefitted from learning how to engage with visually impaired professionals and understanding how best to support disabled children. It was a good project.

soundLINCS, Lincoln

It's a very giving business being a workshop leader – there isn't any taking at all. Within soundLINCS we have a core team and Music Facilitators. We always make sure the core team doesn't get distanced from our work by sending them to visit projects and making sure they understand why they're beneficial. And this links to our philosophy – a good workshop leader can work with anybody.

Where we can, we do a project a year. Sometimes they're organised, sometimes they're not, but they all involve music because that's what we do. We have a lovely programme that we just can't seem to let go of, which came out of the Short Breaks programme Lincolnshire County Council ran a while ago, called Making Noise.

It's actually turned into an ongoing series with Making Noise in School, Making Noise at the Centre, Making Noise in Museums. So we go to different venues across a weekend and the idea is to give parents and carers a bit of a break. But actually we found the parents wanted to take that time to play with their kids and bring their siblings along for the adventure. There have been some lovely case studies of parents and children travelling the same journey and together learning something new.

One of the programmes we've been running over the last couple of years is an 18-week program called Root Notes, where instead of the focus being on working with just young people, we spent time with the practitioners and parents as well.

In fact, some of our workshops are actually aimed more at practitioners than the children, and we call them Active Training. We did this at an Arts in the Park event. The idea was to have ten workshops, five arts and five music, on the hour every hour – 60 workshops in a day. That way practitioners are able to engage with youngsters and see how they react to certain situations. Often they learn how to do something in their training, but not how to apply it to their kids. It was a hit – we had 850 people sign up!

Déda, Derby

The project began as a six-week, after school drop-in dance club for a special needs secondary school. Several years later, we've engaged with young people, built up a group of talented, dedicated dancers and have been back pretty much every term since!

Because of the relationships that we've built up with the children, the school knew that we understood them completely. When the children decided they wanted to perform their dance routines, the school were able to say, "You know what our students can do; you know what the next step for them is."

So we started off small. The primary school would come across at the end of term and watch the children perform, and then last year we encouraged them to perform at our county platform at Buxton Opera House in front of about 500 people. They had a fantastic time.

They went through the application process and were selected just like everyone else. The children were mesmerised by the day and were an integral part of the event. They were up there with the county youth dance performance – it was a really positive experience and a great step for them. In fact, they want to build on that success next term.

The project was a huge success with the children. They've grown in confidence, are able to work with new people and most importantly realised that they're the same as everyone else.

For us, the project was a success because we worked with the right artist. You can't just put anyone in to work with special educational needs children – it needs to be someone who will get the best out of them. In the same way, it's great to be able to work with parents and come up with a unique strategy to engage their child.

The children now understand that learning takes time and they can't always join in with others in the same way. But they're dancing their way through that journey, one stage at a time.

High Peak Arts, New Mills, High Peak

The Film Cuts Club gives young people the opportunity to express themselves. We provide the sort of activities that disabled young people aren't usually able to take part in at school, perhaps because they're sidelined a little. The chance to become that artistic, creative person is something that really excites the young people that we work with.

Chapel High school was the group with the most profound needs. It's a lovely environment where they have a dedicated special needs corridor and really nice, really committed staff. One particular member of staff had two different groups that we worked with. During the course of the project, they tried activities like stock motion animation, writing short story lines and acting to camera. Their aim was to describe their experience of being at school, especially moving from primary to secondary.

With this idea in mind and an October deadline, the children are working on a DVD that will address worries and reassure prospective pupils at their school open day. They've written and acted out little scenarios, and one of them has produced a tour of the school. Some of them took the technical stuff on board whereas others wanted to shine in front of the camera – but together they feel like they're using the resources to give something back to others.

The staff member working closely with them noticed that the young people were doing things they never thought they would. In particular, there was no way one lad with cerebral palsy could use a camera because it was just too hard to control. But with an iPad, he was in control and that's just fantastic.

They're really chuffed that they're able to help new pupils. Because sometimes they don't feel like they make much of a contribution to the school, but with this project they've shown themselves and others that in fact they do.

Soft Touch Arts, Leicester

It started about a year ago with two young people attending two-hour funded sessions – they were just off the wall. Lovely kids, complete geniuses, but they would never talk, not at all. They'd be sat in opposite corners of the room with their heads in pieces of paper!

Since then, more have joined and we now have quite a group of young people, all referred to us by special educational needs agencies, who've knitted together incredibly. They play computer games together, draw pictures, watch the group band play and even meet up outside our sessions. It's done wonders for their communication skills and confidence.

As part of the project, they used things that influence them to create the background for a self-portrait. It might not sound much, but this wouldn't have happened nine months ago. They let us take photos of them to create a stencil and they were able to express themselves.

I think the real product of this project is the improved socialisation. Yes, they've all learned some art skills, which is really important, but the fact that they're working and having fun together as a group is a huge step for them. For most, it's the friendship group they've never had.

It's our format that makes the project so successful. Because it's so flexible they feel comfortable. The project is based in one main creative space where group activities take place. But if group work starts to become a bit much, they can go to one of the other rooms for a bit and come back when they're feeling less flustered. This is a safe environment for them – they can do what they like without being watched or analysed.

Every single one of them has done this by being themselves and the group is constantly expanding. It's become a great social session and they love it.

Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham

One of our missions is to help people to see the world differently by introducing them to the work of contemporary artists and exploring their imagination. What's really fascinating is to see how closely this connects with people with autism.

I think the main positive for the young people isn't necessarily having more opportunities to do art, but that they're able to express themselves in a way that's understood.

One particular project which is part of the Tate – led Circuit Programme funded by Paul Hamlyn, saw us working with Crocus Fields and the children referred to them who have extreme autism. They worked with Sam Metz, an extremely experienced artist who has a passion for working with autistic young people. She worked closely with them as they developed, introducing them to the gallery that was their base for a six to eight week workshop and where they exhibited their work to the public.

It was incredibly moving. And the thing that I remember most is the support workers being almost in tears, saying: "I've worked with this young man for over ten years. And in the last eight weeks, Sam has been able to move him on leaps and bounds in terms of his expression and being able to communicate his feelings in a way that isn't speech." It showed us how powerful our work can be.

Sam's approach is entirely peer-led. So with this project we were able to just go with what the young people wanted, with Sam there to help them shape and reflect on what they were doing. There's a freedom that they don't have in other situations.

This benefits all of the young people we work with, as well as adults. The link to personal identity, being able to express yourself and not being afraid to have an opinion – it's something that resonates across all of the work we do.

Lincoln Drill Hall, Lincoln

The most regular and positive engagement we have with disabled young people is through the Butterfly Club. It's simply a party night where they can come and enjoy a disco or party evening, make friends and be in a safe environment. They can really appreciate the venue, our café bar, for what it is – a community arts centre.

We had about 15 young people at the first disco night we ran. Now we run it every other month and we get about 90 to 100 mixed disability young people turning up! It's getting to the point where it's sold out – the café just isn't big enough. So we're trying to move it into the main auditorium to allow more people and their carers to come along, because it really is a fun night.

Alice, who has been running our regular youth theatre for a number of years now, comes in with her laptop, clears the tables and sticks the PA in the corner. And she's great when it comes to the young people taking over the decks. She creates a great atmosphere, but it's the young people who really make it – they trust us and trust the space. There are three or four regular attendees who have pretty vivacious personalities. We even had a budding romance starting between two regular attendees.

We will always be accommodating if we can, offering touch tours of the venue before events for anybody who is partially sighted and needs to have a feel around to be comfortable.

And it's a really good way of getting them engaged in other activities too. Now they're confident and able to enjoy themselves in this venue, we want to encourage them to join a drama group for disabled young people, which begins in the autumn.

I am very keen that our work doesn't appear tokenistic. So we don't just have a page in the back of our brochure that says, 'Oh, by the way, we also hold some party nights'. When they're happening, they are as much a part of our programme as any other event. It's not an add-on – it's a core, integral part of what we deliver and that's what makes it a success.

Derby Theatre, Derby

Kes and Pulse were integrated, intense production projects that encouraged a lot of engagement between deaf and hearing actors, allowing us to get to know people and understand what they really needed.

It was the people and organisations involved that made the projects so successful. We worked with a number of national and regional organisations who work with the Deaf and who voluntarily interpreted for us. Scene and Sound taught me a lot about the work that needs to go into captioning before the show. In fact, we're developing a partnership with them as they're keen to demonstrate how captioning looks and works- not all deaf audiences want to or can use British Sign Language.

Our writer wanted the deaf characters to be ordinary young people, so their storyline was quite funny and light. What was most interesting I think was for the hearing audience to have to read the captions. A lot of people expected us to provide a voice over, but we didn't because we wanted hearing people to be put into and live the world of a deaf person. And that to me is the real motivation: raising awareness and shining as much light as we can on this subject.

It's a very immersive experience, and the young people really got a buzz out of having an audience. Their confidence has developed massively. They've learnt how to communicate and interact altogether and now they don't worry so much about being non-verbal and that's a really positive thing for them.

Royal and Derngate, Northampton

When we took our Christmas show to Kings Meadow School at the beginning of this year, the teachers were really keen to collaborate on a project and get students to engage with us. Their idea was to have some sort of festival to celebrate the school and its students.

When we suggested having a week-long arts festival embedded into the curriculum, which would deliver the Arts Award and see the children work with quality artists, the school were overjoyed. Although it was an ambitious idea, we were successful with our funding. 35 students took part and one member of staff is now trained as an Arts Award adviser.

It was a fantastic opportunity not only for the students but for the staff who saw them interacting differently. We all realised that it was about communication and making sure these young people were getting what they needed. When there were days that didn't go to plan, we'd think about what we'd do to change it for the next day.

And we must have done something right as we had some lovely moments. One lad who didn't really want to participate in any of the activities, suddenly decided to write a play. We sat together for two hours and wrote three scenes – the staff said that was the most he'd written all year! He was totally engaged and within that week he discovered his career pathway lay in writing. It was really nice to see that he'd been inspired by us.

Another activity involved making flags of countries. One student turned to me and asked if he could create his own flag. 'Of course you can,' I said, 'but you have to come up with the country's name, its population and its policies.' His year six teacher thought this was a brilliant idea and decided to make it a class project for the next term. It was great to see a creative activity inspire further work within the curriculum, and that's how the relationships between staff and artists should work.

It's been such a learning curve for the young people involved. Every single student tried something new and for me that means they all succeeded. The fact that the Arts Awards are embedded into the curriculum means that they can all come out with a qualification and the proof that they've been on an arts journey of their own.

Junction Arts, Chesterfield

In 2012, we worked on the project 'Old School' with two schools in Bolsover: Shirebrook Academy, a mainstream school, and Stubbin Wood, a special school.

Shirebrook is an ex-mining community. It's disadvantaged, run down and their schools were no longer suitable to educate children in. As part of the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme, a new building was constructed and the two schools became one. Moving school is a big thing and we wanted to support the transition to help the children adapt and stay happy.

With that in mind, our project had two aims. To get seven children from each school interacting and forming friendships. They became quite a tight-knit team and I'm sure there was a trickle-down effect. They'd have said to their friends, "I've been working with children from another school and they were really nice." The environment is definitely a more pleasant one because of it.

Our other aim was to create an archive of memories and stories from pupils and staff, past and present, to preserve the schools' legacy. The may have been run down, but the buildings were home to a lot of memories.

The project was extremely successful. The lead artist had experience in working with young people with special needs, so every child was involved. We also worked closely with the building contractors – some of the workshops even took place in a Portakabin on site! Everyone was made to feel really relaxed, comfortable and positive about the move.

We put posters and adverts in local papers and printed postcards so that parents and pupils of all generations could share their memories and be part of the project. We collected some absolutely fantastic memories, achieving everything we wanted to – and more.

We had to do something with all this material – something special. We put together an exhibition and invited pupils, teachers, governors,

councillors and even the local press to celebrate its launch. It toured both schools, the local library and the council offices, and because it coincided with the London Olympics and their drive to celebrate equal

opportunities and teamwork, we were awarded an Inspire Mark. That's something everyone can be proud of.

But without the help of our funders, the project couldn't have happened. Thanks to them and everyone involved, the children's first day in their new school was far from daunting – they were happy, positive and excited to see their friends, old and new.

Writing East Midlands, Nottingham

Richard O'Neil is our writer in residence, and for our project 'It's Our Write' he worked with children of all ages to actively involve them in the arts.

In one part of the project, we worked with a group of secondary school children from a Roma community and those with English as a second language, to increase their confidence and improve their literacy and language skills.

In the other, we worked with two classes of year four children to engage them in storytelling and improve their writing skills. We saw their imaginations grow and creative ways of thinking begin to emerge.

Both parts of the project took place in school. For the secondary school pupils, it became part of their performing arts BTEC – they worked together to write a piece before showcasing it in front of an audience at their local theatre. They also went on trips to arts organisations and venues, which really encouraged them to see the arts as more than just a school requirement. It even made them think about possible career paths.

Meanwhile at the primary school, we tied our project in with the school's curriculum – it was a real collaboration to support and enhance their arts awareness. They also took part in several trips and put on a puppet show for their parents, other classes and teachers.

This project actually affected more people than we first anticipated! We engaged with parents and introduced them to the school environment. They spoke with Richard, interacted with teachers and connected in a way they'd previously not been able to because of language limitations.

There were two things that really made this project a success. One was identifying the individual needs of students. Delivering information in a way that supported them not only helped the children, but helped their teachers understand how they learned best. The other was the collaboration and teamwork that made the project happen.

From teaching staff to puppet makers and set designers, we had the right setting and the right people to achieve the best outcome.

Nottingham Libraries, Nottingham

Our projects have long term benefits for children, and that's what we're about.

Let me tell you about one of our bag books sessions. We have a wide range of bag books and one of them is about a little girl who brushes her hair. In our box of props that go with the story, we have a wig and a hairbrush. Obviously we encourage the children to feel the wig and the hairbrush and then to actually brush the hair. There was one particular child who had never brushed her hair, would never touch it or even have anything to do with it. After coming along to the session, she actually started to feel her hair and eventually brush it. The librarian delivering that session received personal thanks.

At the moment, we're doing something with Arts Award money. Children, lots of them with dyspraxia, dyslexia and specific learning requirements, come along on a Saturday morning and learn how to write computer programmes. We also held specific workshops in the holidays for children to create robots and then programme them to move and do various other things.

It had a real impact on one young boy. His mum filled in an evaluation form saying how it was perfect for him, because normally he can't go along to group activities as he can't settle in. He really worked hard to develop his ideas and become part of the group on the first day, and on the second day he was able to work on his own to complete the computer programming. He was in his element.

It's a nice feeling to know that you've delivered something that's ticked all the boxes and incorporated everyone's needs. Actually, it's absolutely fantastic!



Takeover 106.9, Leicester

Craig is one of the volunteers who helps our young people broadcast and produce live radio shows. We were able to employ him for a year as an apprentice after being awarded a small grant of under £10,000. In just one year, he's been involved with a massive list of positives and we've been able to affect the lives of at least 40 young people.

Craig is a real example of how the grant has done what it's supposed to, and through his own initiative and hard work he's made the role massively bigger than we initially thought. It's meant that I'm able to leave Craig in charge while I do a lot more of the other stuff like attending meetings and conferences and really developing the business for the future.

And I think Craig would tell you himself, he had a challenging upbringing with virtually no qualifications and no full time job before this point. But that made him able to relate to the young people in a very personal way. He's also meticulously organised about how everything is structured. It's really fed down to them, and they've learnt how to meet the requirements of a radio show.

So with just one grant, we've been able to take on someone who's had an extremely positive impact not only on the way the organisation is able to run, but in showing the young people that with hard work, anything is possible.

Converse Theatre, Lincoln

Across the course of 12 weeks, we worked with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). We ran drama sessions in the building where they meet with children and their families – it was a great project.

It's actually the outcomes that are really important. They created a performance piece that they showed mainly to their mums and dads rather than the world, but that was a big step for them. They feel they can express themselves and have participated in experiences that really count.

And it was the combination of a powerful venue, great facilitators who really cared about the young people and the quality of the work, and the young people themselves that made this project so fantastic.

People Dancing, Leicester

Big Dance is really exciting for us. We know there are inclusive groups and Deaf and disabled people getting involved and that's fantastic.

What motivates us as an organisation is desegregation: to get to that point where disabled people are no longer noticed for being different. Disabled people are a large part of our society and culture. Everyone has the rights to opportunities to access the arts, whether it's dance, visual arts or even carpentry.

It's all about access, fairness and equal opportunities.

Derby Libraries, Derby

It's about breaking down barriers and perceptions and realising that, in fact, libraries are non-threatening, safe places.

But people have their own ideas about them, that either they're not accessible or they're not going to be welcome. We get that a lot with parents who have very young children. As soon as the child starts crying, they feel they have to take them out. Well, long gone are the days where libraries were silent. We don't worry about that and if other customers make comments, we'll talk to them. It's also about everything that goes with the trip. So having to get there, parking, getting in and even the toilet facilities.

They're the sorts of barriers that make it difficult to engage with families. And that's what has to change.