

## **Sensory Journeys Symposium**

**Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2018**

**14:00 – 17:00**

### **Ellesmere College**

Lisa Pittwood, Co-Principal, Ellesmere College

Angela Smith, Deputy Head, Ellesmere College

Lisa - So, hi, good afternoon, I'm Lisa Pittwood, I'm co-principle at Ellesmere College and Angie's vice-principle at Ellesmere. It's that moment, isn't it, when you sit in the audience and you kind of realise, okay, right, we are the last on really, and everybody else has said most of the things we were going to say. We're probably not going to be quite as entertaining as the pupils from Ashmount and Abi. However, we have got some key things we really want to share with you over the project, because the project over the last two years has been amazing, it has been unique. Initially it came around, as Marianne said, from some bits of project that we were involved in alongside Marianne to do with pre-work to The City Classrooms. Ellesmere's always been a place where, really, where we've really valued what we can do in the arts, but we've always really struggled to develop that and use it in a way that we know that the youngsters that come into the school really need it and benefit from. We don't give them as much as we would like to and in the ways that we would like them to have it as well. Some of that's been around capacity, some of that has been around being able to find the right people to do it, so when we get opportunities to be involved in things we jump at the chance. We're the best participators in the world at things, and as soon as we get something and if we have an opportunity, and we think it's something that will benefit our students we just take it and we run with it. And that has been one of the biggest successes with the project, really, that ability to be able to do that.

Ellesmere was in quite a unique position at the time when the bid came around, partly because we'd not been in a new build, partly, because we always used to be a secondary school, really, for children with moderate learning disabilities, and over the last four or five years we've changed significantly. We're now 4 to 19, and actually we've been admitting a cohort of youngsters, non-verbal, autistic spectrum, really different from us, you know, early-years as well, and so that's been a real challenge to us. So when the project was

actually written, and again that was one of those moments where, a bit like Abi said really, that the person that had wrote the bid from our point of view at Ellesmere alongside Marianne had moved and gone on to a different job. So when Marianne had come to say, actually, we've been really successful in this bid, we were like, okay, just remind me what it was exactly, and so it really was a suck-it-and-see type of thing.

We do have a strong profile at Ellesmere about arts, and at that point our biggest thing was around dance, really, and that was the link into the project, initially. But we were dealing with some our own issues at the time about trying to meet needs, so we had some hopes for the project, and these were some of the things that we were hoping that alongside whatever the project was going to do some of these things for us, and it would assist, help us to develop our communication environment. We were admitting whole cohorts of new youngsters that we hadn't been traditionally dealing with and we were trying to find ways of helping them to access the curriculum, access their world, and to be able to communicate in a different way. So it seemed to tick some of those boxes.

We wanted to be able to create opportunities for the students to have a quality time with artists in the school. We have got a strong art and design department, but it is a different thing, I know it's already been touched on a little bit earlier in the afternoon, you know, that it's a different approach to it, and actually in a school there's obviously different pressures on you as well, as people have said. But we wanted to create those opportunities in order to do that. The Reggio Emilio approach, as I've said, I knew nothing about it, it's not something I've come across, and we're talking a lot in schools about being child-centred and being child-led, and looking back over this, and at the time it's really made me think, actually, we are child-centred. Everything we do is around that child in front of us needs. Are we really child-led? Hmmm, no, I'm not sure we actually are in lots of way, because, and again, there's a common theme. You'd think that Abi and I had looked at each other's presentations and we really haven't, you know, but this thing around control, you know, I'm a head teacher, yes I am a control freak, it is actually what needs to go in part of the job description. But that's about how, as teachers and educators, we're trained as well, and about the parameters that go around the outsides of our jobs, about how we plan, how we organise, how we kind of structure the child's learning in front of us. And that's what we're taught, that's how things operate, to us. So that's what our nature is. It isn't necessarily

child-led in the way that I've come to realise a bit more about over the last couple of years, directly through the project. And that has created some significant challenges in the environment in the school and with the staff, because actually we don't like to let go of that in that kind of way, and that's been quite difficult in some ways. And also it seems a bit of a contradiction, because you're dealing with autistic youngsters who, you're told all the time it's got to be this, it's got to be that, they need routine, they need this and they need that. And actually this was something slightly different, so it's allowed us to be quite reflective.

We wanted to engage the students in something new and, again, one of the biggest significant challenges really, I suppose, was just around that balancing of things. We take part in lots and lots of thing. There's lots of people coming to our door to say "do you want to be involved in this, do you want to be involved in this, can we do that?" And so this project, really, was only one bit of everything else that was on top of what people seemed to be their day job as well. And so we take it all, and sometimes to our own detriment in some ways because sometimes the timetable doesn't look anything like the timetable that everybody thinks that they're working to, because you've kind of changed it so much because you wanted to create those opportunities. But we wanted to engage students in something different.

We recognised straight away when Manya with her great big, you know, hand-drawn, creative schedule about what was going to happen in the first year. We wanted to make sure that the disruption that it was going to be seen to cause was going to be something that staff weren't going to turn around and say "oh do you know what, I could've done that, I could've done that myself, in my own classroom without actually having any of this disruption and any of those things", and that was quite a significant thing at the time as well. So we wanted it to be something that we couldn't give as part of our general curriculum with the staff skills and knowledge we had in school, and hopefully as well we thought it might provide some kind of training and development. And that's, again, a really interesting thing because projects come and go. You know, you come in, you think we've got this residency for a week, for two weeks, whatever it is, and more often than not what you find is that the actual lasting outcomes of that, they've gone when the project has gone, they've gone when the person has gone out of the door, and then everybody kind of breathes a sigh of relief and think "ah that's alright, I can just get on now with my job and

with teaching this to this in the way that I always know". And so right from the very beginning there was something around the project that was really different in that, and I think that's probably really hooked up in the kind of Reggio approach to it, which as educators is just not something we come across. I think, as well, in the very, very first instance of talking with Marianne and Manya to start off with, I realised where my biggest challenge was going to be, and some of it is just not about even speaking the same language, really, in terms of, not got a creative bone in my body, really, I don't think, I've not found it yet, or maybe there's one small one down in my foot, I'm not sure. But it was a really different set of circumstances, actually, and very different sets of language and approach, and actually, again, the biggest things that we found was matching that against the organisation of the school day.

So I have to say it was with quite a lot of trepidation, I kind of said "yeah alright", and everybody involved in it we've said "yes let's. Shall we go with it then?" And it was a bit like that, wasn't it really... I had no idea what was going to happen, and that was just how it was. But we are an amazing place for being flexible, for being keen, enthusiastic, wanting to participate, and if we think it's something that's going to have an impact on the young people that have come through our doors then actually we'll do it. And I think that's probably where it all started from in some ways. Ange is just going to share some information with you about the residencies and what we learnt as Ellesmere over those residencies and over those times.

Ange - So I'll start by just saying that when Manya was speaking earlier she spoke about the blank faces in the first CPD. I was one of those blank faces, and then Lisa (Pittwood) said "guess what you're going to start managing?" Okay, again, not much creativity in here, but it's getting better, much better. Lisa you look surprised? (looking at Lisa Pittwood) Don't. I'm really not that creative. So the first residency with Gaby, I think, a bit like Abi said earlier really, it was quite early on in the academic year and it sounded absolutely fantastic, I mean I have to say, a little bit like Lisa was saying, some of the language, I have no idea what any of you are talking about, but this sounds amazing and brilliant for our students. And really it doesn't matter if I don't understand it because I'm not the person who's actually going to be participating in this and getting the things out of this.

So this picture here of a young man, if you said “Would you like to be involved in some movement, some arts and dance?”, answer's probably going to be a big fat “no, I don't actually.” But it really engaged him. And what's been really nice preparing for this has been looking through all the pictures and the videos. So you've got to bear in mind this is a year and a half ago, and I can't remember yesterday, so looking through those pictures, looking through those images, and just looking at the change in face, and you can see the start of the sessions and the end of the sessions is so different. So at the start of the sessions they're all like this, “yeah let's see, let's see what you've got for us” and by the end they're absolutely amazed. So the impact that this had, you could see. One of our younger students here, actually just to engage with somebody that she didn't know, a face that she didn't know, that's what she got out of that. And that's what we got out of it, those moments, those wow moments that you get out of these.

I think the thing that we learnt from it though was about that communication, that communication between the school and the artist is absolutely key; for us to really understand what the artist can bring to our students, but for them to understand the needs of our students as well, and how things might work, and how things might not work, and it's okay if things don't work. So that was the first residency.

The second one was turned on its head with Liz Clark. This was mainly focused on our primary children, many of them have sensory processing difficulties, and really, as Abi has said, and that was about kind of exploring the space and using materials. And, like Ashmount, we now have lots of sponges and foil and lots of things that actually, for us, you know, as a school we have a limited budget, we can go and splash out on lots of wonderful and amazing things, but actually we can buy some sponges, we can buy some foil and we can buy some material. And that's the great thing about this actually, is that with this particular residency we thought well actually it's a couple of hundred quid and it made a huge difference to our curriculum offer, because we involved a lot of different teachers, and we'll look at our professional developing in a second, and they end up actually having a go at doing this and this approach, and they're like “oh, actually, I might just go to Wilko's at the weekend and buy some sponges”, and all of a sudden I think probably across Leicester and Leicestershire sales in these things probably spiked at a certain point, because we realised we could do this. It might not be in the ESPO catalogue or the

traditional education catalogues but actually it's something that a child's picking up a sponge and pushing it against their face, and what difference that was making, and then they were going up to somebody else and pressing it against their face. And they were communicating through something as simple as a sponge. And to watch some of those moments. I stumbled into one of these sessions looking for somebody, walked in and then didn't come out again... "Do you want to come in for a bit?", "yeah is that ok?" "yeah, well now you're in here..." and I didn't want to leave actually, and it was such a different way of working, and we were exploring light and shadows, and the children were just communicating through different ways, not verbally necessarily, but what we did see is over the course of the residency actually some of them starting to verbalise, and that is a huge step for our children. So, this made such a difference really, in the sense of not just within the group of staff or the group of children involved but actually people started to go in and see what was happening: "Oh maybe I could try that in my class?"

The last residency of the first year was the Bamboozle one, and as Manya rightly pointed out it was more of a consultancy model, which to be honest with you I'd completely forgotten that there was a difference between what we did and what Ashmount did. But the absolute positive is that the flexibility of Bamboozle was so important to this because we do have a timetable, we do have things like breaks and lunches, and we do need to work around those things because the children still do need that structure. And Bamboozle were absolutely fantastic: "Okay what time do you want us to start? When do you want us to finish? What staff are we going to have?" And all the pre-communication, we had a couple of meetings before, we were meeting constantly throughout. The time with the staff afterwards was absolutely key to the success of this. The children going on a creative journey without having to put pen to paper, they were creating stories without putting pen to paper and now these children sat in a classroom where you need to write story, and you know, I couldn't do it, it's not going to happen. But you got such key moments out of the Bamboozle residency that, again, started to inspire the staff to approach things like teaching Literacy and English differently in their classroom. Actually you don't need to put pen to paper, you can do this in a different way.

And then this year I've been super lucky because I've been involved, my class has been involved with this, so I can speak with personal experience of going in and thinking "oh

yeah, let's see how this works then", because you know, I was a little bit cynical about it. That changed within probably five minutes of Sian meeting the children really. Key to this was ongoing communication with Sian, absolutely key. Constantly emailing each other, constantly talking. Throughout the session, after the session, before the session. Changing things. Me kind of saying actually "one of them has not had a great lunchtime so don't worry if that happens", "that's fine we can do this instead". The getting-to-know-you session with the students beforehand which Sian did as well, which was where we did the plasticine, so she was only in for about half an hour or so, but she got to know them and they got to know her, and it was so important that she was a safe face really for them. She came in the next week to do the session and "oh we know you, you were here last week and you're okay actually, what we did was really good fun".

A lot of people have said it, letting go of control. I'd write a lesson plan, and my lesson plan would be, you know, every five minute something different, every ten minutes something different. My lesson plans now, and this has impacted on me after Sian's now gone, is we have a starter, and we have a huge block of about two hours with these children on Tuesday afternoon, we have a huge block of time which just stays student-led. Now that was scary the first time I wrote that because I thought "oh where are we going to go with this?" Oh my word, I have never seen such progress in children. Their confidence, their independence, their pride; their pride in what they have achieved in a two-hour block, and... Immersion. Well Lisa will tell you, she's been in my lessons. We might have over-ran a little bit and me going "ooh you've got to go home! You've got to go home! Oh quick, coats, go go go!" Because we were all so immersed in it, we absolutely loved it.

And every lesson we got a bit of feedback from them, and every week "how are feeling?" Happy. Happy or proud. Every single one. Earlier that session, they didn't always start the session like that. Some of them started it tired, moody, angry. And they finished every single session happy or proud. Now, I think that speaks for itself to be honest with you. You know, you can throw out all the data in the world that you like, but actually the children just saying that in a two hour block of time. The other thing for me, for this year as well, is that exposure to the arts and culture. So my group came here in November time, and I asked them before we came "has anyone ever been to an art gallery?" No hand went up. "Has anyone ever been to a museum?" No hands went up. "Has anybody ever been to a

theatre?” No hand went up, until they realised actually we'd taken them to the theatre. So actually in their home lives they weren't experiencing these environments. So coming here... wonder and awe across their faces really, because they'd never been in this kind of environment. And actually, that idea of opening up... it's okay to come here. It's okay. It doesn't matter what background you're from, it's okay to come to these environments, because they're not places that their parents necessarily were bringing them to. And one of the challenges for us is trying to engage parents in that as well. So we've told them all about this, we're trying to encourage them to come along. I've seen some of them at the end of the day when they pick their child up and say “please come, because your child really has done this work with very minimum help most of the time, actually really independently, and you should be really proud”. And one dad said, a bit like Abi's really, said “she told me a bit about it, I didn't know it was actually going to be at an arts centre though”. And I was like “yes so please come along”, so hopefully he's going to come along.

I think that one of the main things for us as well is the impact it's had upon staff. So not just people that have been involved in the project. These are some photos from staff professional development sessions. The one on this side is from last year when Liz Clark came in and did some work. Now, it's quite focused on particular staff. And then what we've done is share videos and photos and anecdotes with the staff over the two years. And then we got them involved. So the wonderful greenhouse. Some of the poles may have been decorated by some of our staff because we have ran out of time a little bit. I never seen such enthusiasm for one of our CPD sessions, ever. And then it kind of invited some of them in... because “what are you doing in some of these sessions? Do you mind if I drop in and just have a look?” And it's just spread out wide. We've had, now, people try some of these things out. We've had people emailing saying “I've found this idea”, to all staff, “maybe you'd like to try it”. And we wouldn't have had that before because it would've been a fantasy idea, when we use it in my class nobody's really going to know about it unless you come in. And now it's like “here's this idea, here's some photos of what I've done”, they're on the daily bulletin to all students, they're on the newsletters. It's absolutely fantastic.

Lisa - And really, as Ange has just said, you know when you enter into any of these kind of projects, you write a project bid, you know the things that you're hoping it will achieve, and

there are some things that are really, really tangible. And I suppose what we've kind of seen is a real ripple effect throughout school in lots and lots of different ways. For all the staff, for CPD, you know, again. To start with it was a very small group of staff that were really directly involved with it that knew even what the Sensory Atelier project was, what we meant by when we talked about unlocking the world. We did mention it at the staff briefing to start off with but then past that, really, again, it was that kind of thing of those things that's happening in the stage space, "not really for us, we're not involved". And we've seen a massive difference in that, a really tangible difference to hear it in the culture, to see people talk about, share information. Some of the bits that's Sian's done, this residency, you know actually other staff that have not actually had any direct involvement have gone and taken it and seen it, they've been sticking up their own art work in the staff room on the windows of their plasticine fireworks, and these are people that have not had that direct impact into it. So it has been that extra additionality of it. Some of the things that have just popped up over there are the things that we did write into the bid. They weren't there. You know, they are those kind of things that sit in the spaces in between, and they are the things that have actually been surprises, and the things that you've not been able to capture in some ways. You know, we do lots of observations, we're in and out of classrooms all the time, and actually I've seen really tangibility, again, in the observations with staff, doing their kind of non-artwork, being just very child-led, very child-centred, Reggio-type style / practice, kind of early years classrooms, which it is just becoming embedded in our culture, and that to me has been the most significant thing really, because Sian has gone now, the others have gone now, and actually it is still there, that moment in Ellesmere. And that's where we sit at the moment with it, we want the next steps for it. It doesn't feel like it's kind of finished, really, it feels like it's just the beginning. And we could talk in much more detail and much more depth about the things we have found. I mean, one of them. It shouldn't have happened actually, but the sensory atelier was written into a child's EHCP – their Educational Health-Care Plan. It shouldn't have been, it really shouldn't have been. It was written into the part of their EHCP that kind of says that they needed to have access to daily Sensory Atelier sessions. And it was a bit of a mistake really, but they meant, really, was that the practice that was happening for this youngster has unlocked him in terms of his communication in such a way that he needs to experience those types of things on a daily basis, and we've actually had to take it out of the plan because nobody knows what Sensory Atelier is at the moment [audience

laughter], but you know, that's significant and it just goes to show actually the impact that there has been. I've been involved in many, many projects over the years.

I've been at Ellesmere for 20 years, you know, and things come and go. This kind of feels like there is a uniqueness to it that actually reflects the uniqueness of the learner we have and so, you know, we're just kind of there, ready and waiting for the next bid really.

Thank you very much.

END