

Can this be me?

Student-created music theatre sees achievements soar

Exeter House School – Woodford Valley Primary Resource Base – La Folia

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Rebecca Carson, Head of Woodford Valley Primary Academy



Brief description of the work

An ongoing programme of student-created music and theatre performances in two special schools, aiming to:

- improve communication skills
- enable pupils to express their feelings and ideas
- increase their confidence and raise their aspirations
- develop their creative skills

The most recent work was *Full Fathom Five*, a musical theatre interpretation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, with words, music and movement created by students.

Who's involved

- Exeter House School – caters for pupils with severe and profound multiple learning difficulties. A significant number have autism spectrum disorders. All pupils enter school with a statement of special educational needs, an increasing proportion having sensory and physical disabilities along with more complex learning needs.
- The Resource Base at Woodford Valley Primary Academy, for pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorders.
- La Folia, a music and performing arts organisation.

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Raising aspirations, self esteem – and smiles

Like many young people, the students at Woodford Valley Primary Academy Resource Base and Exeter House School are quite capable of challenging their own, and others', ideas about their capabilities. Yet their work with music group La Folia sees them consistently achieving creative, personal, social and even physical successes that exceed even their own expectations. And the key is – it's all their own work.

The two schools started working with La Folia in 2005, following a small project in the mainstream part of Woodford Valley Primary Academy. Initially, this involved running weekly sessions bringing musicians and artists into the schools to perform, but after just a year, the schools and La Folia decided to take the work to another level, enabling pupils to be more actively involved as creators and performers.

This was a bold move. Being able to communicate their thoughts and needs is one of the main barriers to learning and development for these pupils. So going beyond this, to find ways for pupils to express their ideas musically and creatively, and to document or record them so they could be shared and developed, was a tall order.

Nine years on, however, and the pupils are actively involved as co-creators and performers of pieces of musical theatre based purely on their own words, music and movements. Some pupils and staff have been involved in the project throughout and some are obviously new to the work. The impact is showing not only in social and team-work skills, but also in the pupils' – and their teachers' – aspirations for their life and their futures, and their academic results.

The difference it makes

Everyone involved agrees the project has a powerful effect on self esteem, communication and team work – particularly significant with children who can find relationships challenging.

As Woodford Valley headteacher Rebecca Carson says: "They're seeing and recognising social responses from other people during the workshops, and particularly the performances, that they might not get otherwise – smiling, warmth, pleasure in their reaction to them, eye contact."

She continues: "We often try to make these young people sing our songs, join our world – but through this, we're joining their world, seeing the way they want to express themselves. And that's made even more significant for them when we use their songs with the rest of our school."

Francesca Williams, class teacher at Exeter House, has noticed changes in behaviour too: "The kids are so excited and enthusiastic when the La Folia team arrive. The excitement ripples around the class, but there's never a need to reinforce behaviour because everyone's focusing on the piano, or the music, getting ready to join in. They take turns, respect each other, even though they're all eager to contribute."

What did you like the most?

"Fun to do singing" – "I liked singing with my friends in character"

"I felt happy and excited to sing"
"I liked acting in a story from years ago"

How did it make you feel?

"Happy" – "Happy to be with my friends"

What are you most proud of?

"Proud of being with my friends, singing" – "Parents cheering us on" – "Made me proud to act and sing; I want to put a CD out!"

An integral part of improving performance

But the impact goes far deeper. Having their ideas, sounds, and words transformed into music theatre, and then performing it themselves, also affects their academic achievement, says Rebecca Carson: "What we're always trying to do is to access our pupils' learning potential. The work they do with La Folia shows what they can achieve, and is an integral part of improving our school's and pupils' performance."

Helen Southwell, Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator at Wiltshire Council, agrees: "It really makes a difference giving young people an audience for their words, and there's big emphasis on speaking and listening, so that impacts on literacy too. And with numeracy, they're having to count to maintain rhythm."

One child said, "Can this be me?"

Through working with La Folia, the students find their voices – literally, in some cases, as Sue Kent, General Manager of La Folia, explains: "We have electively mute children who speak for the first time. We have people who are thought not to be able to move who do. It sounds like a set of miracles! It isn't, but it just so touches the spot and develops so many different things in them. It's different from what they experience in the classroom, particularly with autistic children. What we do is explore what they think and feel. In one school one child said, 'Can this be me?' and we used it as a title for a project."

And it appears that some of the biggest changes have happened with the quietest children: "At the start, our quieter students would look to a trusted adult for reassurance," says Francesca Williams. "But it's those who undertook the strongest transformation, some even had solos, strengthening their self-belief and confidence."

They start to believe in themselves

The work is also raising students' aspirations, giving them ideas for what they'd like to do outside school and in the future. Many of the pupils have taken up music or drama activities outside of school. As Francesca Williams of Exeter House says, "They're excited to learn they have these skills, and they have the creative freedom to develop them." Some of the older students who've been working with La Folia for some years now have gone on to study performing arts at college.

Students' stories¹

Sarah: Sarah aged 17, has severe learning difficulties, but discovered that she loved to sing. The team at La Folia encouraged her to explore operatic singing and as her voice developed, and her confidence, so too did her leadership skills, and she performed one of the main roles in a production. One of her teachers says: *"To see her now is remarkable, she's so grown up, calmer. She loved that role, and started to encourage her friends, began to be a leader – that was really something. She has more stage presence and a real awareness of staying in character. And she's now involved in an after-school drama club. She's more willing to speak up and take a responsible role."*

George: George was one of the quietest students. He has severe learning difficulties, and has problems understanding social boundaries. He was always hanging back and never happy to speak out. Now, one of their teachers says: *"You can have a conversation with him, he sang on stage without any trouble, he's combated his nerves, got a lot more confident. He's less anxious, more willing to talk in class and in social situations, and joined an after-school drama club."*

Amy: When the team first met Amy, she was often screaming and shouting angrily – but now she's channelled her energy into singing, and her self-expression is joyful. *"As soon as our singer starts singing, Amy just opens her mouth and starts singing at the top of her voice,"* says Artistic Director Howard Moody. *"She just opens herself up – she's completely different to the child we met at the start of the project."*

Nina: Nina who is autistic, was aged 11 when she took part in one of the La Folia projects. Headteacher Rebecca Carson believes it helped her to be able not only to take her SAT exams with the rest of the school, but to achieve Level 5 across all subjects. *"Achieving Level 5 is very unusual,"* says Rebecca. *"A child might have that potential, but they wouldn't usually be able to cope with the whole exam situation. I'm sure that doing the performances contributed to her feeling good about herself and less anxious – she was able to tap into her potential."*

Sal: Sal is autistic and finds it difficult to express her emotions appropriately. She has a limited understanding of social language, and obsessions that dominate her world and her thinking. She'll happily sit alone in an activity completely immune to others around her, often when the activity isn't appropriate to the situation she's in. If she's encouraged away from the activity, her reaction is often to become very frustrated and angry, expressing herself physically and emotionally. Through working with La Folia over a number of years, Sal has found that music is a way she can express herself and receive positive responses from those around her. As her teacher says, *"She gets such a thrill from seeing that other people are enjoying what she's doing, that there's a connection there."* She now has an instrument that she loves playing, takes lessons in school, and has sung and performed in front of the school. Her teacher says she feels more accepted, and also can accept and appreciate other people, and particularly their music. *"It's something she'll attend to, it'll snap her out of spiralling into a different world."*



How it works

The performance pieces are based around themes from classic texts and legends, including Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, and most recently, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which was created into a musical theatre piece called *Full Fathom Five*, performed at both Salisbury Cathedral and Salisbury Arts Centre.

La Folia's Artistic Director, Howard Moody, is accustomed to people's surprise about where the work has come from: "We're often met with disbelief when we tell people that the students have created the words and music themselves. But the score has indeed come from their own musical imaginations. Each word or musical phrase has been generated from their responses to the stories and myths from the past."

It helps them to understand feelings

"In our experience, all young people understand the archetypes and basic emotions contained in the classical texts in music, literature and philosophy," explains Sue Kent of La Folia. "We never 'dumb down' when we're working with pupils in special schools."

Howard continues: "We use the structure of an ancient story and they tap into it, they instinctively understand those big themes and archetypal stories. And it helps them to understand feelings."

Speaking about some of the main characters from *Full Fathom Five*, he remembers: "As far as they were concerned, they really were those characters, and when it came to their big scenes, the focus of their energy was intense. I've heard Shakespeare's lines spoken in a way I'll never hear again, they really understood what they were saying."

A drawing out of their self-expression

The process usually starts with a session to familiarise pupils with the story. This is often a dramatic telling of the story by an actor, who encourages interaction and response from the young people. As Sue explains: "The actor will say, X did this – what do you think of that?" And Howard will note down their responses, collecting their words and from time to time asking them to respond musically by saying, 'That's a really good word, can you sing it to me?', so then he has the beginning of a song. It's a drawing out of their self-expression."

¹ Names and in some cases gender and other details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

"I then very quickly convert that into something that's musically understandable, usually through keyboard," says Howard. "I'll then reflect the ideas back to the pupils, using the actor or singer, and that process reinforces their imagination. That happens firstly because we've actually listened to them, and secondly because we show them that every idea is going to be valued, and that we'll help make sense of it for them. They end up with music theatre which they've inhabited fully and is entirely their own."

Rebecca Carson describes a typical moment by saying: "Howard can be playing, and a pupil might come and start to join in, and he just absorbs them into the playing, responding to their movements and noises. And that's helping communication ... all of the team are so highly attuned to our students."

The initial session is followed by a series of workshops where members of the team work with pupils on songwriting, dancing, and acting – again, putting the pupils' creative responses at the forefront of the process. Towards the end of this, other musicians such as a trombonist, violinist and accordion player, join the core team and pupils to add colour to what's developing.

For *Full Fathom Five*, this process took eight months in total, from the November opening session, to the July performance, but with a period of intense activity from March to July that included weekly sessions of half or full days. The pupils created 13 original songs during this time.

These students had total ownership

Finally, on the day before the performance, pupils from the two schools come together to rehearse: the older children from Exeter House carrying the story with main parts, and the younger children from Woodford Valley having smaller parts or supportive roles.

Helen Southwell, Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator at Wiltshire Council, said of the *Full Fathom Five* performance: "These students had total ownership of the production – it was clearly an immersive experience for them. They weren't on the sidelines, they were central to the performance, holding the audience, and not being coerced, but genuinely wanting to do that. It gave them an opportunity to showcase their abilities, not their disabilities. I was really moved."

"You could see and feel from the expressions on their faces, the physical pleasure it was giving them," she continued. "Even those who are profoundly disabled, in wheelchairs and with no speech. It wasn't something you saw and heard, it was something you felt."

More about the approach

La Folia's approach to working with students in special schools is quite unique. None of the team has received training in working with special needs students, as Howard says, "Knowing too much detail about a system's labelling of a problem or limitation can hold you back. In each workshop, we have the support of the highly knowledgeable and skilled teachers and carers, which frees us to concentrate solely on the work – and that empowers us, and the students."

And although all the musicians are hand-picked for being at the top of their game artistically, just as important are qualities such as empathy, and the ability to improvise, be flexible and respond to young people's ideas.

"It's really about improvisation and being open to each moment, being led by the young people," says Howard. "You might have spent months on a big idea, then you walk into a room of autistic children, and they will immediately make you see it all in a different way!"

One of the powerful aspects of the work, Howard believes, is that it enables these young people to make their own decisions: "All of them have experienced taking ownership and control," he says, "and I think that will help them in later life too."

It's challenged our expectations of the students

Teachers have learned through the process too – particularly as the methods are very different to their own. Francesca Williams says: "It's given me confidence to provide more opportunities for students to take ownership of their learning, particularly now they have the confidence and the skill set to do so. Working with La Folia has inspired me to have a more 'organic' approach to my teaching."

Rebecca Carson says that it's changed her team's understanding of the students: "It's definitely challenged our expectations of what they can do and what they will enjoy. We didn't anticipate they'd be able to access that depth of emotion and musical skills. Now, half of the students in the Resource Base are learning a musical instrument through one-to-one peripatetic lessons, and they also play in our weekly school orchestra."

The team just seems to open something up inside our students

"We have children who are sensory sensitive and put their hands over their ears if there are loud noises – but they don't when instruments are being played or people are singing," Rebecca continues. "It reduces their anxiety – and that helps their learning. The team just seems to open something up inside our students that means they don't conform to expectations. We've even had young people who have talked for the first time – it seems to unlock something inside them."

Helen Southwell agrees: "As a local authority Learning and Teaching team, one of our key objectives is promoting excellence and allowing every child to achieve. This was excellent, and allowed children to achieve what simply would not have been possible otherwise."

Could we help the young people you work with to realise their potential?

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