



Adrift: Evaluation Report

By Jude Bird, Head of Education, Leadership & Research, Curious Minds



Introduction

Action Transport Theatre (ATT) is the only Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) based In Ellesmere Port. Its key focus is work by, for and with children and young people and, to this end, they have a substantial track record.

The ATT mission statement states: “*we don't believe children are the future. We know they are the now, the present. Their individual ideas and imaginations are relevant today and inspire and inform everything we do. We work with children and young people as creative collaborators, to make professional and aspirational theatre which we share locally, regionally, nationally and internationally....*”

“We have established unique processes of making new theatre by putting young people at the heart of all our work.”

“ATT continues to evolve as a learning and sharing organisation, working increasingly in strong partnerships to maximise resources and create new opportunities.”



St Bernard's R.C. Primary School leads the Ignite Teaching School Alliance and is a member of the Holy Family Catholic Multi Academy Trust. The school is also based in Ellesmere Port and describes its ethos thus:

“We are very proud of our school and what we offer. St Bernard's is a place where faith, values, learning & creativity come together as one. We are passionate about new learning and are committed to giving the best experience possible to our children and families.”

Amongst the core principles that underpin the school's work, it lists:

- Positive Partnerships enhance change.
- We have a responsibility to contribute to the world.
- In a positive approach there is much to celebrate.

Context of the Project

Although there has been some historical contact between these two organisations, it was through Curious Minds' Specialist Leader in Cultural Education (SLiCE®) fellowship programme that a meaningful partnership emerged.

Emily Reid, Assistant Head Teacher and SLiCE® fellow, partnered with ATT on a research programme focussed on the British Values agenda in 2016-17. Simultaneously, Jess Egan-Simon, Project Manager for ATT was also participating in Curious Minds' Cultural Education Leadership Programme (CELP) - now known as Culture and Arts Schools Experts (CASE). The combination of these two people brought the organisations together in a deeper and more connected way, which proved to be fertile ground and a springboard from which to develop the 'Adrift' programme.

'Adrift' was initially a 5-minute play by Beverly Hancock-Smith. It was written in 2011 for 10 Tiny Plays, a project by ATT for the Chester Literature Festival. ATT developed the work in 2017 as a commission for children aged 8-13 years, supported by Big Imaginations.

The partnership with St Bernard's is based on a joint commission of a new play. This venture has broken new ground for ATT as a professional theatre company and is possibly a unique model across education and young people's theatre.

Evaluating Adrift

This evaluation has aimed to capture the following:

- How the school and theatre company worked together to provide a quality process for learning and creativity, whilst creating a strong new work for children and family audiences.
- To what extent this 'added value' for the school and theatre company.
- To what extent the work has had an impact in relation to new skills and thinking, specifically in relation to oracy, and whether perceptions of refugee people have been changed or developed (by participants and audiences).
- How the work has been able to connect with local families in a meaningful way through partnership work between ATT and ST Bernard's.



The evaluation process took place over a 6-month period with most of the focus in the autumn term 2018.

Interviews took place with:

Action Transport Theatre

- Nina Hajiyanni, Artistic Director.
- Kevin Dyer, Writer.
- Mike Beigel, Associate Practitioner.

St Bernard's RC Primary School

- Andy Moor, Head Teacher.
- Emily Reid, Assistant Head Teacher.
- Staff and pupils.

Conversations were also undertaken with parents and families attending the launch performance, on 1st October 2018 at the Civic Hall, and a comments board collected comments and feedback after the event.



Key Learning

I will first address the **working relationship** and **quality process** along with **added value** and **oracy**, as participants responses largely merged these together.

Timescale

The long lead in time was seen as valuable for both parties and the school realised they had a relatively untapped resource on their doorstep. Over an 18-month period the two partners were able to watch and have direct experience of how each other's organisations worked with children and young people. This created building blocks that led to the process of co-commissioning.

ATT commented on *"...the huge generosity of the school - they gave space and time with humility. Very good teachers allowed us to do what we do and what we wanted to do. School really believed in having a company in to make a play."* ATT felt that, as a result, this made them work harder. The ethos of both the school and the theatre company were seen to be well matched in relation to children, which made the relationship more likely to work. They recognised they brought a different energy and spontaneity to the situation.

Ethos and Ways of Working

A shared ethos, trust, mutual respect and appreciation for the different ways of working through formal education and theatre-making seem to have been the cornerstones of the success of this relationship. As a result both organisations chose to co-invest in cash, time and processes that would generate best outcomes for each party involved.



Location was also seen as important, in that both buildings - Whitby Hall and the school site - were within relatively easy walking distance of one another. This enabled work to take place on both sites.

The quality of the working relationship between the Head, the Assistant Head and, in turn, the company, enabled them to arrive at a process-led making of a show within the context of teaching and learning in a primary school.

Theatre company members sought school staff input *"Asking us what we need? What is it all about? What is the curriculum intent? How are you developing the whole child?"*

Teachers identified how ATT actively encouraged participation; creating a 'have a go' culture for reluctant participants, which enabled them to break free of their comfort zone. The company also chose the non-usual participants, thus giving them an opportunity to shine through the *"freedom to be creative, with the permission to play and explore"*. The stylistic differences were described thus: *"It can be uncomfortable as an educator to let go. I was*

nervous about how they (the company) explore a question - when 60 children are chatting in a room, that is difficult from an educator perspective". So for an educator to suspend judgement offered significant challenge and meant operating from a place of uncertainty, not knowing how something was going to work.

Questioning

Questioning has been a vital element that has underpinned the working relationship, as well as the quality of the process and the development of oracy. One teacher said *"When there are no right or wrong answers nothing can be lost"*. A piece of research identified that, on average, a class teacher asks 400 questions a day and gives one second for the response. Dorothy Heathcote in 'Mantle of the Expert' suggests we stop asking children questions to which we already know the answers.

Company members weren't afraid to leave space for answers and were comfortable with silences. They neither had to agree or disagree, which staff saw as promoting questioning in depth, as children became more open to thinking and responding. Teaching staff found this modelling of questioning most profound and it prompted them to reflect on their own classroom practice.



Questioning can lead to discovery which is collectively owned and reveals the best way forward. *"Another question leads us to another interesting place. I find it exciting that we are all making it up, like situations where people get stuck and we develop a strategy to get out of stuck situations. The arts allow that, plays allow for that"* identified an ATT company member. Children also noted that much of the time adults don't hear them and one said she valued the work *"because my voice is heard in this situation - because I am a child doesn't mean my voice can't be heard"*. Pupil voice took on a whole new dimension as *"children began to articulately engage in conversations about hard issues"* through the skilful scaffolding and questioning of company members, who offered age appropriate provocations.

Real World

Working on something real gave the work a specific context.

The company had a task - to make a play. The children and young people loved having the actors there and watching them take on their ideas and being open to change.

Real world learning also translated into career possibilities, as the whole team introduced themselves - dramaturg, director, writer, composer, lighting designer, actors - one of the children observed *"this is really a great opportunity in life to learn more and become a theatre person"*. It also opened up wider opportunities for future participation, as children said they would go and see the production, then go on to drama club and see another show at ATT, so hobbies and ways of engaging their families was being noted.

The company's creative team worked with a class of 25, using the same processes they would have used had the children not been present. Therefore, the children were working as writers; entering into discussion, debate and critically analysing the work. They worked with high dramaturgical concepts and were differentiating between 'real' and 'imaginary'. They did a deep dive into the processes of play-making and vocabulary, and concept retention was in evidence six weeks later.

Relationships

The children saw the quality of the relationships between themselves and the company members as different from the usual way adults interacted with them. *"They are really nice and actually listen to you. They loved working with us, it's not fake"*. When asked to explain how they knew that, they gave an example of how the company tried their ideas and they saw them incorporated into the play. Also *"by the look on their faces and their body postures you can tell if they are being real"*.

The children's standard perception of adults was that *"they work with us doing what they think they should do"*, whereas ATT members *"are not following a script and talk freely with us"*. Children posited that working with the company had helped them talk, and if they spoke confidently there was a chance someone would take on their views. It was both empowering and encouraging for the children; as professional people doing a professional job collaborated with them in an in-depth way.



Teachers observed pupils being boosted by seeing something being performed that had been proposed by one of them. They were validated by the process and their authentic voices were heard because the company also spoke with them authentically.

Authenticity is a key 'Quality Principle' advocated by Arts Council England in relation to work with children and young people, and that has certainly been in evidence from the perspective of those engaged in this project.

The creative processes were enjoyed by both staff and pupils. Drama sparks imagination and teachers saw different ways of accessing imagination through drama techniques. They reflected that nothing felt rushed, whereas they themselves always felt the pressure of time. Children enjoyed the freedom to move and to transfer from one situation to another, they said they felt less pressure, were happier and it was more enjoyable, as they were able to think. They said this was a contrast to *"normal school"*. Pupils reported that they had learned new theatre specific vocabulary and enjoyed being involved in all aspects of the production from play making to music and prop making.



Reflections

Senior school staff have been hugely committed to the work and have themselves done some significant soul searching and reflecting: *"What are we here to do? This is the real stuff of life. What should be at the heart of all our schools? The future of society and our planet should be at the heart of the curriculum. Systemic changes promote a tendency to stay the same"*.

They perceived the skills of company members and their abilities to get inside a child's understanding; where nothing was dismissed, it was held and respected and they did not impose their own perspectives. *"They didn't correct anything and kept the purity of the children's responses. They gave time to let perception and thoughts unfold which was driven by the learning process-not outcomes."*

They found themselves having sophisticated conversations with their pupils that they had never before dreamt of having, and the work was described as transformational. Authenticity of purpose and the newfound trust that they would be heard enabled the children to speak with confidence about their own thoughts. Senior staff reflected on how this work could be developed strategically, so that it wasn't seen as risky. A senior leader said that *"writing floats on a sea of talk"*, and a company member that *"children are live to stories"*. Profound

work was generated through guiding and supporting the narrative around themes of social justice.

Company members felt this way of working had led to a richer creative process - witnessing one another be generally inspired and challenged, writing and re-writing and taking on board feedback after each draft. They were committed to working with the whole school community and being in the children's space. The 'speak' of education and theatre is different and the company would have liked their work to be translated more into education speak. This decoding of one practice into the language of another may be a fertile area for future development. How do ambiguities sit with an educational culture that seeks certainties? How does improvisation sit with a high level of planning?

New models and ways of working are being forged in the fires of collective ambition and creative collaboration between the theatre and the school. A lead member of the company said *"We are looking at an existing model - starting from scratch. Wondering what we can do together and where that might lead us. What else is there to be discovered? Where will the children take us?"*



Summary of Learning Points

Working relationships

- The value of a long run-in period, where both organisations witnessed each other's working practices with children/young people.
- Choosing to collaborate and co-invest, based on a shared ethos and mutual respect of co-professionals. Time, value and resources committed from both sides.
- Location - opportunity to work on both sites.
- School staff suspending judgement, however uncomfortable it might be at first.
- Value placed on creative practice by the school and trust in one another placed by both organisations.
- Greater opportunity needed to translate practice into education-speak and roll out the model to other schools. How can this work inform curriculum design and development across a range of subject/topic/themes?

Quality of Process

- Open questioning has underpinned much of the work. Responses from staff and pupils and the company all attest to this.
- The company has enriched their own working processes by inviting direct participation and input from children and actively incorporating their suggestions which has been highly validating for them.
- Hearing children's authentic voices in response to creative provocations has promoted healthy dialogue between children and adults.
- Real world learning has taken place where complex issues have been broached and children have been invited to help find solutions.

Oracy

- Children have developed new vocabulary which they have retained and been able to apply it in the correct context some weeks later. They have also learned theatre-specific terminology through experiential learning.
- They have been encouraged and supported to offer ideas and views and to contribute to something real. They have been heard which has kindled their confidence and enthusiasm to speak and contribute in learning situations.

Added Value

- Ground breaking work has taken place for both organisations.
- The company is now an integral part of the school community and the school community feels part of the ATT family.
- Staff have seen their pupils respond very differently and have seen effective, creative working processes modelled in an exemplary way.
- Company members have challenged their own working practices.
- Creating awareness of careers in arts and culture.
- Develop CPD/CPDL for school staff on questioning.

To what extent has the work had an impact on the perceptions of participants and audience to refugee people?

Interview conversations with pupils and staff indicate the work has raised the children's awareness of the plight of refugees and opened up discussion on social agendas including refugees and pollution of the oceans.

Having actors from different cultural heritages - Spanish and Brazilian - added a dimension to the work. Conversations with audience members took place before the performance although quotes were collected afterwards. Comments included *"Brave choices"*, *"Deep. Thought provoking stuff"*, *"Conversation starting"*, *"Brilliant and relevant"*.

It was probably too early to assess how the children's attitudes had developed as no baseline of their understanding was captured as the work had begun before the evaluation started. From the audience demographic it was clear that a number of families were foreign nationals and that the play spoke to them personally and directly.

Creating a quality new work for children and family audiences. Does a quality process always lead to a quality product?

From the children's perspective, the work was quality because they saw their input reflected in it and this was augmented by public acknowledgement in front of an audience.

A significant number of children and parents in the audience would not have seen live theatre before, so the whole experience of attending a performance, being near the actors, knowing your child had been involved and perhaps the content speaking to you about your own life would make it quality. Clearly it was current and thought provoking and garnered emotive responses from some quarters.

A company member identified the difference between process versus product and participation versus product, and believed these things never work in all their component parts. Though the relevance to the world and the value of embracing political plays was identified as important, and it was good to have a go – to see what can be developed out of

it. The ultimate responsibility sat with the professional theatre makers and not the young people. The performance at the Civic Centre did not reflect the quality of the work due to its questionable suitability and limited technical facilities, however the value of the venue is that it is a known by families and in is the centre of Ellesmere Port.

Schools are prone to needing to headline such events with some curriculum context. Was this the right place to do this? The play could have stood alone and context could have been offered in another situation. A play can weave its own magic without an educational introduction.



How has this work been able to connect with local families in a meaningful way through partnership work between ATT and STB?

I think this has been touched on in the previous two sections and the scale of this is outside of the scope of this evaluation. Had a level of tracking been in place following those who participated in school, then how many of their families attended the performance and who has followed up by attending sessions and performances at Whitby Hall, this data would provide a better and meaningful picture.

Certainly several hundred community members watched a new piece of writing and that would be significant anywhere.

Conclusion

The significance of this partnership, and the wider impacts it can and will have, can be built on in future working. The benefits to both parties have been highlighted in this report - largely in the respondents own words.

Intersecting the worlds of arts and culture and education offers rich rewards. Schools are where the majority of children and young people spend much of their time and are often the places they are exposed to their first and only experiences of arts and culture. The quality of the learning for both children and young people within this project indicates they have had the best possible experiences at an early stage of their school career.

The high value for school staff to witness their pupils working with co-professionals from a different sector and developing and growing new skills and abilities demonstrates there are other ways to work. Unlike attending a course and then coming back and trying to implement ideas, the activities have taken place in their own setting with children they know well.

The work has stimulated higher order thinking for all involved and has taken on agendas of social justice and real world learning, which is no small feat.

ATT company members have exhibited courage, risk taking, openness, skill, authenticity, creativity, innovation. They have opened many doors, through which the young people and those who work with and support them can step and view the world through different lenses.

