

darts



breathe & connect

Case Study

Breathe & Connect Artist Development

Artist Development

Breathe & Connect

Breathe & Connect began as a three month long intensive active research pilot funded through Doncaster Council and an Additional Restrictions Grant from South Yorkshire Mayoral Authority. A period of development between January and March 2022 enabled a team of eleven darts core and freelance artists to work collaboratively with each other, and with health and education professionals, to respond to specific issues caused by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Long Covid

Prior to the pandemic, there was already a high prevalence of adults with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) - diseases that cause breathing-related problems. This has been exacerbated by Covid-19 as a virus significantly affecting those with COPD, as well as resulting in significant numbers of people with Long Covid. Office of National Statistics (ONS) early research into Long Covid shows the most common symptoms are breathlessness, fatigue, respiratory issues, memory/concentration issues, anxiety and loneliness.

Musicians and dancers built on their previous experience of singing, breathing and movement to explore how participation in these art forms could improve the health and wellbeing of adults experiencing Long Covid. The artists worked together, and with groups of Doncaster adults, to test and refine their approach, developing a model that responds to the specific needs of those with Long Covid.

Early Years

Tuneful chatter is a creative approach to early years development that focuses on communication and language, personal, social and emotional development and gross motor movement. darts has developed the approach over 30+ years through a wide variety of projects across the Doncaster borough in nurseries, schools, community halls, libraries and at The Point in central Doncaster.

We consulted with Doncaster Early Years practitioners and found that there has been significant negative impact on very young children in terms of personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and gross motor skills. Early Years Foundation Stage teachers at Doncaster Primary Schools have told us that their pupils are struggling. They don't know how to listen, sit and concentrate, focus, take turns or interact with adults. Many of those for whom English is an Additional Language haven't spoken English at home during lockdowns and have fallen behind with language development.

Musicians and dancers collaborated on planning and delivery of 40 music and movement sessions with groups of 3-5 year old children at Grange Lane Infant Academy and Town Fields Primary School. Activity was based on well known story books (Dear Zoo, Wow Said the Owl, We're Going On a Bear Hunt) and was designed specifically to develop children's personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and gross motor skills.

Makaton was used to support understanding and offer a way to communicate that isn't verbal. Makaton is a unique language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate. It supports the development of essential communication skills such as attention and listening, comprehension, memory, recall and organisation of language and expression.

How has co-designing and co-delivering this project impacted on artist's practice?

All artists involved in the project agreed that working as a team enabled more depth and deeper learning – both in terms of the art forms and the issues that the participants were facing. Working alongside another artist offers additional ways in for the participants e.g. through words or music or movements. It offers an additional layer of creativity and inspiration, as well as having another person in the room to manage any issues that might arise.

There was significant value in being able to come back together as a team throughout the project. Sharing learning and feedback, reflecting, sharing skills and offering different perceptions and insight all increased each artist's knowledge and understanding. Sharing specific creative approaches also increased each artist's confidence in using creative tools that might previously have been outside their comfort zone e.g. a musician using some movement to add value to their approach.

Having two artists in each session was incredibly valuable for so many reasons. Being able to reflect immediately post session was efficient and helped draw on different perspectives. Artists gained from exploring a variety of approaches enabling fresh ideas and activities and avoiding burnout.

“One of the other big influences on my own practice was working with a dancer – I include movement in all of my Early Years sessions, but seeing a movement expert devise activities was inspiring – Alice came up with

completely different ideas to me and seeing her lead these activities has given me the confidence to try similar ideas again. Another element I will keep for future work, is the focus on wellbeing i.e. emotional check-ins, focus on breathing exercises etc."

One area of exploration is around the second person in the room. Artists agreed that it is important going forward that we are clear about each role and what the expectation is – e.g. could the second person be a trainee, a mentor, a volunteer, a health care specialist etc. and are they there to co-deliver, support participants or observing? Depending on purpose a second person could be from outside the project, but would need to have a degree of familiarity with the group, the context, the project, or the artform.

"Triggers are really hard to deal with. Learning to continue the session and contain the situation without it negatively impacting on the others in the session – which is why we need two artists or an artist and a support for this kind of work."

For one emerging artist who joined the team as a trainee, the process has been a real journey of development – not only in terms of working with very young children for the first time, but also the value of observing specific facilitation skills to support participant development, respond to issues or provide the best possible experience for those in the room.

"It has made my practice deeper and I have deepened empathy for those with the condition."



How significant was the impact on those participating?

There were more challenges than expected for all of the artists involved. For those with Long Covid, activity had to be slowed right down and artists were surprised at how much they needed to lower their expectations in terms of how much could be achieved in a session.

“Recovery is not linear, we can and should only work with what we have and how we are in this moment, and that’s ok.”

“I knew it would be professionally run and that the support would be all there from darts, but I was surprised by how much it has affected those with Long Covid. Many are more severe than I imagined.”

Many participants struggled with energy levels and some were triggered by elements of the session – finding visualisation exercises or relaxation techniques very emotional, for example. Artists found it exhausting at times to monitor each individual in the room – checking energy levels and emotions and making sure that the activity was adapted for every participant. All agreed that it was essential to work closely with the participants themselves in order to fully understand and respond to the condition.

“Being in contact with real life people living with that condition has been a journey of discovery.”

“I am learning how to be invested and listen to the participants, but without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. We have learned a new level of professionalism and work ethos, while working with really vulnerable people.”

Within the Early Years settings, artists were surprised at the low level of experience and understanding within the children. Visualisation could be challenging when many children had barely left their homes, never mind going to the seaside or a park. This meant that children’s imagination, empathy and ability to express emotions was severely delayed as they just hadn’t had the experience to put words to feelings, sounds or environments.

“I’ve worked in nursery 15-20 years. This year I could see a massive difference in terms of communication and language, PSED – they didn’t know how to play with each other. Those children have experienced the pandemic for the last two years – they haven’t experienced parent and toddler groups, they’ve just been at home with their family. One woman told me that she had never taken her child to the supermarket. That really shocked me.”

We found that there are huge levels of referrals for ADHD and Autism, and that the size of the waiting lists means that children may not be seen for over 17 months. In many cases, children are displaying delays and behaviours associated with those conditions, but may simply be as a result of lockdown e.g. attachment disorder. Teachers reported that the systems to diagnose issues and

needs haven't been effective over lockdown, so without diagnosis, it is difficult to provide the right support. The fact that the sessions did have a positive impact on children's development suggests that our creative approach can really make a difference.

There was much discussion about the role of the health and education specialist going forward and the expectation on us as artists, rather than health or education experts.

"When researching wellbeing you have to be really careful what you read or listen to so being able to listening and work with those living with the condition is essential."

"Remembering that we are not health professionals, even though some of our participants want to talk to us as though we are. We must remember, whilst being fully invested and supportive, to put the art at the heart of the work. Learning how to work with members of the public who may be emotionally vulnerable and may have quite specific or significant needs at times."

Developing the approach collaboratively with participants was also a huge learning point and enabled artists to consider the content and delivery much more deeply.

"Feedback so far has been nothing but positive. This tells me we're on the right path. So well acknowledged and received"



In general, artists felt that their sessions had had a positive impact on those participating, and that the model can be scaled up and delivered elsewhere.

“People appreciate that they are being heard, that we are going on the journey with them and that we are creating a programme that is human-centred and tailor made for them.”

“This has been so insightful and worthwhile, and I am so proud to be involved on what is a very little known illness.”

“I feel like we are ahead of the curve with offering arts response for this illness, and there is a massive need for it.”

“There has been a need for supportive arts health for chronic illness for so long, and now through the Long Covid research, we finally we can offer beneficially and well researched programme.”

How did the project impact on Early Years practitioners?

Using lots of Makaton enabled staff in the primary schools to get involved, use their existing signs and learn new ones. Artists observed them repeating new signs with other children. Some of the Makaton signs also helped to develop motor skills i.e., butterfly or giraffe. Makaton also embeds the idea of supporting difference within the school and embeds inclusivity from an early age.

One teacher adopted the idea of the emotional check in and now regularly does the hello song and how are you feeling with the basic Makaton signs that the artists taught the group.

Staff at Grange Lane reported that it was really useful for the staff to see artists leading work, because it allowed them to step back and observe progress and spot some milestones. Observing tiny breakthroughs with the children who were non-verbal i.e. one child who initially couldn't engage, and seeing him move to joining in with the actions and movements and eventually copying the Makaton and mouthing the words was great – teachers could tell that he desperately wanted to join in and could see what the artists were doing that moved his engagement on.

Staff were also able to observe how a story can be deconstructed to improve and develop very specific skills e.g. turn taking, balance, emotional expression etc. The 'Towel Dance' worked well, for example: repetition allowed children to really 'get it' and offered a moment of consistency between sessions. Children and staff started by copying the artist and moved on to shouting out body parts as part of the dance – encouraging communication and language development. The fast paced movement and integration of rhythmical fun raised the children's heart rate and gave the group a chance to talk about heart rate, energy levels and steady breathing at a really understandable level.

Overall, there was a high level of staff buy in from both schools. Staff have been championing the work to other schools and other staff within the school. The Grange Lane arts lead came in to observe the session, due to the staff raving about the work.

How well did darts support you as an artist?

Artists felt very well supported throughout. The project was very well planned, despite the short time frame, with milestones set, full team and small team sessions booked well in advance, additional training and mentoring time and shared resources for artists to research to give factual context to the issues being addressed.

“We now feel prepared to deliver authentically and robustly.”

There was real clarity in what the objectives of the project were and what darts wanted to get out of the process, which framed how the sessions were planned and fed a cycle of test – learn – reflect – plan – test. There was also great value in Managers being closely involved in the process throughout. Having an outside eye was key to ensuring that delivery was to standard and in line with the aims of the project. Going forward, this could involve experienced core and freelance artists experiencing the work of other artists.

“The training has been really well held and supported – so important when working with the unknown! I never felt alone delivering and researching – I felt part of an active supportive team.”



How did it feel to work to such a short timeframe?

The three month timeframe was challenging in terms of planning and the impact on capacity and other programmes of work. However, there were benefits for the artists in working in this way – the team approach to getting started quickly brought real energy, and knowing that all the dates and full days were planned in meant that artists could really focus on the project with clear headspace. Working closely as a team within this time enabled relationships to build quickly, which has had a positive knock on effect in other projects and areas of work. Artists felt however that it is important to achieve a balance – it would not be advantageous to deliver more than one intense project at a time or in close succession, as there would be a real risk of burn out.

What have you learned?

All artists agreed that the experience had enhanced their practice in many ways. Being able to collaborate and learn from others within their own, or a different artform was a breath of fresh air and has had long term impact on the quality of their work.

“Having the time together as a team of movement specialists, to further develop and enrich or practice at this time has been so beneficial and will feed our work moving forward.”

Being more involved in the aims and objectives of the project enriched the evaluation and delivering alongside a second artist gave them the opportunity to step back more, reflect on impact and find space to observe properly.

“I opened my range as a dance artist. I thought what I was doing was ok – and it was to level, but it has totally extended my range of delivery and enriched how I teach and read the class.”

“An inspiring experience, if I can now teach the class like this – what else could I learn?”

In terms of the sessions themselves, artists identified the following essential ingredients for each area of delivery:

Long Covid

- A slower and much more gentle approach to the session.
- Maintaining gentle positivity / joy in the room.
- Scaling back the quantity of content so it has a more streamline and slower flow.
- Finding new music choices that suit the mood and style.
- Using visualisation for those who may find moving uncomfortable or too tiring
- Altering the length of the session to be suitable to the participants rather than giving them a set session length they have to get through.

- Reversing class content to end as we began, so changing the format to tailor to the group and complete the circle.
- Finding a new methodology of energy flow with peaks and troughs to allow rest time.
- Permission to include chat time to both rest and build connections.

Early Years

- A list of 'ingredients' to include in every session e.g. listening time, turn taking, an activity that involves sharing etc.
- Having a structure that was repeated in all sessions, but with elements of fluidity to enable response to the group or the environment. This gave children clues and signals about what might happen next, or when something was coming to an end.
- Lots of repetition is vital for Early Years children. Structure helped them pick up on cues. This was especially important for children who were struggling with language/speech.
- Repeated structure allowed artists to see progress quickly. It also allowed them to monitor and manipulate the energy of the children – either by bringing it up and or bringing it back down.
- A hello and goodbye song served as great bookends to the sessions. It also helped to create a safe and welcoming open/close to the workshop. These songs were consistent and familiar, enabling all children, even those who struggle with language, the opportunity to have a voice.
- Makaton was essential to making the work more inclusive, supporting the children who struggled to communicate – it gave them an extra clue or helped them to understand instructions. It enhanced the way artists communicated the story by adding strong visual clues. It supported the delivery of the language used, through engaging, repetitive and memorable physicality.
- Supporting the children to focus on their breathing as a grounding exercise was really useful for grounding and helping children to regulate their emotions.

Final words

"It has been an absolute privilege to work alongside such experienced and passionate professional artists, and I have felt completely supported throughout the whole experience. I feel as a team we have come to a stage where we know exactly how we all work as individual cog within the team machine, and know how to respond to each other in order to provide the best possible experience for the children."

"The whole process has encouraged me to reflect, evaluate, expand and build upon my practice. This chapter of my professional development is one that has enhanced my pedagogical skills as a facilitator, and shall assist me in moving forward in my continual pursuit of bettering myself as a practitioner."