

Akādemi

South Asian Dance in the UK

Migrations

A project using South Asian dance and drama to explore refugees' journeys

Akademi

Established in 1979, Akademi is a charitable organisation working in the fields of community, education and training to enhance the self-development of individuals through direct participation in South Asian arts. Akademi's community and education departments have gained a reputation for initiating challenging yet accessible programmes of work that draw on the arts to address issues of contemporary social and cultural relevance.

Aim of Migrations

Bharata Natyam dancer Magdalen Gorringer, poet Edin Suljic and tabla musician Neil Craig worked with thirty year 6 pupils at Allen Edwards Primary School in Lambeth over ten sessions from September to November 2000. The aim and objectives of the project, as discussed and finalised between Akademi and its team of artists, and later school teachers, were:

Aim

- To explore the issues around refuge and refugees through collaboration between creative writing and South Asian dance forms

Objectives

- To broaden children's perspectives of the migration issue
- To educate about different journeys and about South Asian dance
- To explore what is meant by "refugee" and "refuge"

Further objectives, as drawn up by Akademi in the funding proposal in relation to guidelines by the Department for International Development and Oxfam, are for pupils to:

- find a common thread in a variety of experiences from political to geographical immigrants
- develop an awareness of global interdependence
- increase understanding of their own background and reasons behind previous assumptions
- make links between themselves and peers whose backgrounds had not previously been understood due to cultural differences
- access an alternative means of expression, i.e. dance, thus tackling inhibitions linked to reading and writing
- take pride in their work through exhibiting and performing
- increase their appreciation and understanding of South Asian dance and culture

Planning and preparation

The school had been identified by the borough's ethnic minority co-ordinator as ideal for the project. Pupils had had little exposure to arts from outside the school – their only previous experience was attendance at one opera performance – however, teachers found that pupils had strong creative potential and were keen to set their teeth into something challenging.

Artists spent four days brainstorming ways of incorporating issues into lesson plans through a variety of rhythm games, storytelling ideas, and simple dance techniques. A planning day was then held at the school where they learned about pupils' specific backgrounds and needs, and went through the structure of the project with the class teacher and headmistress. Ways of integrating children's work in other areas of the curriculum were also discussed.

One suggestion in post-evaluation questionnaires was that workshop leaders and artists are given more time to discuss the project, both before and during its implementation. The practice was that breaktimes and assemblies were used for planning and feedback, and a formal review meeting took place halfway through the project. Talktime before and after lessons is dependent on school infrastructure which varies from school to school. Possibly more informal review meetings could be held every two weeks in addition to this. INSETs will now routinely be held before each project phase for the class teachers to enhance their ability to support the pupils in the South Asian Dance and drama sessions.

The dancer, Magdalen Gorringe, was praised by the school for the quality of her initial planning and preparation and use of resources. The school, in turn, was commended by the artists as being very welcoming, supportive and accessible: "I cannot emphasise enough how much this contributed to the success of the project" (dancer).

The beginning

Twenty-eight children from two year six classes were selected. The three artists worked together during the first two sessions, taking turns in leading activities in different artforms. Pupils found the dance difficult to grasp in the beginning. The dancer and teacher put their heads together after the first and second session and agreed to make instructions as clear as possible, and to break the teaching into simpler steps. This tactic worked, and pupils immediately became more involved. They still had to do warm ups in every session, but they understood why they had to do them and saw them as a means to something more creative rather than just a dull activity. Pupils comments about this stage are: "At first I didn't like it because of the warm ups that we had to do and I thought that we would do it for nine weeks." "In the beginning I thought it was boring. After a few Tuesdays the activity got a bit more lively, like practising our play and making up exciting dances."

The artforms

The group was occasionally split in two so one group could concentrate on writing and storytelling activities, and the other on choreographing story material. The remaining year six children, meanwhile, worked in parallel with another teacher, examining refugees issues through reading, discussion and research.

Teachers and artists agreed that the children learned and enjoyed themselves more in smaller groups. As they had no dance experience and were also at a self-conscious age, this gave them more space and time to explore the tasks given. Pupils were also divided into different performance groups: some performed the various roles on stage, some read out the narration, and others helped create the story. Everybody got the chance to try the different tasks, but pupils were also given the chance to focus on and develop what they felt best at. The roles had different degrees of difficulty, so each pupil was encouraged to do their best. Nobody was forced to perform, but could still play a key role towards the performance. There was also good co-operation reported between the children, who had come from two different classes. They integrated well and were seen to bring their new co-operative skills into other subjects.

Dance

The dancer was reported as “patient and clear” by the teacher. Pupils found the dance boring at first and were nervous about performing, saying that they would never learn enough to have anything to show. As lessons progressed, and the dancer concentrated on providing clearer instructions, they said the dance was “brilliant”, and felt more capable of performing. The teaching techniques emphasised as a strength by the teacher were clear instructions; demonstration; and the way the dancer talked through the performance and the story with pupils. She always ensured that children were comfortable with what they were doing. Pupils remarked that they “had a lot of fun with Magdalen”; “She is an excellent dancer/teacher”; “She is fun and also helpful”.

Music

Pupils reported that they liked the music, “which livened it up and made the dance look good”. It linked well with, and supported, the dance activities. “Neil was great with his drum skills. He made the tune go permanently in my head.” Teachers agreed that pupils “benefited enormously” from having access to a musician.

Writing

Through working with the writer, children first explored the emotional values and practical aspects of their own world such as the concepts of home, family, personal belongings, favourite objects and their journey from home to school. They then went on to think about fictional stories: if they were a superhero, what sort of hero would they be? Who would they help? Who can they help already, without being a superhero? They were then asked to imagine a fictional catastrophe or misfortune that could have disrupted normal life, and that required reliance on each other. The writer drew parallels between this activity and the fact that refugees are people who have fled their home and country under terror, seeking help and protection in other countries, and the development of cultural interdependence in the host country.

Pupils were asked to either write or draw their own stories in the beginning, which facilitated participation by pupils who found it difficult to write narratives in English. Discussion and dance improved their verbal descriptive skills. Pupils’ comments were, “I liked the way that Edin handled us and he didn’t shout.” “The best thing I enjoyed was writing with Edin about super heroes and shipwrecks and other things.” “I liked doing the drawing because I didn’t really want to write.”

Photographic documentation

Pupils enjoyed the visits from the photographer, a Vietnamese refugee, whose pictures were then sent to the school as mementos. It gave them a sense that what they were doing was important and worth presenting, and also got them used to performing to other people. The photographer stayed in the background as an observer, working quietly and unobtrusively.

Co-ordination of artforms

Co-operation and joint planning among the artists was important, especially as there were four artists and two different pupil groups involved. This became difficult when the writer was frequently late for workshops, and felt less need to plan; it made more sense to him to let the story develop organically, depending on pupils’ spontaneous input, whereas the dancer felt that the dance needed to be more structured in advance, albeit incorporating pupils’ ideas. If children were to remember all the different physical actions, the actions had to be very clear weeks before the performance. Thus planning meetings were scheduled, and the artists had to compromise on the extent of detail that was agreed upon. Possibly more care needs to be taken when employing several artists who have not yet worked together, to ensure that they have similar working

dispositions. In a professional environment people do of course compromise, but are not always able to do so to a level satisfactory to all parties. Akademi will in the future be asking for two references in addition to interview with new artists; previously we asked for one reference only, with quotes from previous work. Although Akademi's Education Officer had spoken on a weekly basis with all artists and teachers, the issue of lateness and lack of planning was raised as a problem only after five weeks of work, and after the mid-project review meeting. This made it difficult to implement change within the project at the time.

The performance

The story material and the dance were moulded together by pupils and artists into a single dance-drama production, which was performed in front of the school and parents in November.

Previously self-conscious and disruptive pupils had by then progressed. Initially one particular pupil had to be removed from the class due to disruptive behaviour. The artists involved him in the group work, giving him a specific role which they felt he would be good at. He then took an active part in creating the performance: "I would like to do the play again. My best bit was at the end when we were dancing in roles. It was fun."

Other pupil comments about the performance were:

"The costumes were really good and I liked the rain, lightning, thunder and especially the soldiers".

"I especially liked it when the storms moved from the refugees to the soldiers and made them fall out of the boat. At first I was unhappy about the part but then I got used to it."

"The best thing about Akademi was when we showed the play to the assembly."

"When it was the day to show what we had learned I felt shy but later on I felt I could do it and did."

The dancer, in turn, felt that children had lots of fun; gained some knowledge of South Asian Dance, music, and refugees issues; gained self confidence from performing; and learned to express emotions through movement.

"I never knew I could do dancing from another culture." Noeleen, 6C