

A thinking school

Encouraging pupils to think more creatively was the aim of a development programme undertaken by one special school in Sunderland. Carolyn Barker discusses their journey

Barbara Priestman Academy is a designated provision for students aged 11–19 years with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and/or complex learning difficulties. All students attending the school on a full-time basis have a statement of special educational needs. The majority of students travel to and from school on transport provided by the local authority. A small number of students access the provision on a part-time basis from mainstream schools. The school also offers formal intervention and assessment placements through the Autism Outreach Team.

Since 2008 the school has been working with Creative Partnerships Durham Sunderland as part of its Change School programme. The main focus of the programme is to encourage the pupils to be more independent learners, to become proactive learners and to move away from passive learning methods. To achieve this aim the school embarked on various activities and creative



processes to develop pupils' thinking skills. The Creative Partnerships' Change School programme's overarching aim was to assist the school in gaining accredited 'Thinking

School' status from the University of Exeter. The programme has supported the school in this by enabling a number of projects. The activities undertaken have been wide-ranging and included staff training and working with creative practitioners in school.

What did Ofsted say - March 2012?

'One student recounted his initial shyness when he started school but said that teachers had encouraged him in drama lessons. Now in sixth form, he had recently auditioned for the National Youth Theatre. Another spoke of the help he consistently receives from all staff, who are "always fair and always there". Other students spoke of the improvements in their behaviour because they are a 'thinking school'. This means that there are numerous opportunities throughout the day for them to consider and reflect on the potential outcomes of their actions or decisions on others.

'No students reported any issues with any forms of bullying, including prejudicial bullying. Students related that they enjoy coming to school,

which is reflected in their attendance, which is consistently high. Parents and carers commented on the strong caring ethos within the school, which helped their children to develop in a secure environment.

'Additionally, Barbara Priestman is the first special school in the country to be designated as a 'thinking school'. This latter development alone has had a pronounced effect on students' outcomes. Students themselves speak readily of how these new strategies help them to organise their thinking for learning but also their emotional responses to situations and events. Consequently, they feel their own and others' behaviour has improved.'

Using dramatic enquiry

To support thinking skills in the classroom the school worked with Cap-a-Pie Associates to develop a bespoke dramatic enquiry programme to be delivered in school. The dramatic enquiry created uses the theme of memory and is entitled The Memory Box. The Memory Box involved facilitators Ruth Johnson and Dan Forth, who documented the piece. The premise: two sisters visit a doctor who specialises in memories. One of the sisters has lost her memory and the other presents a box of photos to jog her sister's memory.

Pupils took part as observers in the role play and then as facilitators to offer suggestions and ideas – creating their own questions, thoughts and 'provocations'. Many students bought

> into the idea of the drama and were able to give deeper level, reasoned responses and suggestions, which staff described as unusual. 'The Museum of Perfect Futures' was the second phase of the dramatic enquiry. Sixth-form students helped to shape the focus of the drama. Using a previously disused wild space in the school as a stimulus for the enquiry, the sixth formers came up with the name 'Explorer Scholars', created artefacts and shaped the dramatic ideas. The theme of Utopia or a perfect world was used as a stimulus for the drama.

Sixth-form students helped to shape the focus of the drama

To make the enquiry credible the students had to commit to the idea that they were explorers looking for a lost city or a perfect place. Each group was given instructions from a 'leader' via a video link and told that they had to decipher a special message. The message came in the form of an ancient relic. The message turned out to be a map, which led them to the wild space. On reaching the wild space they encountered Gwynnie, a woman

living happily in the woods by herself. The dilemma for the students was to decide if the dwelling she had made should be torn apart in order for them to excavate the site as it was of historical interest or if Gwynnie should be left in peace.

To analyse their ideas and categorise their discovery the pupils came up with the suggestion of using thinking maps, which had previously been introduced in lessons. Staff were impressed that pupils were able to recall what they had done in lessons and apply it in a different context.

The third phase of the work was the development and delivery of the project to support the school's new Building Schools for the Future programme. Once again, this project was planned with staff and pupils and delivered by staff and Cap-a-Pie Associates. It entailed the introduction of a group of 'alien' children with specific learning needs, who had supposedly crash-landed at the school. It was the pupils' role to ascertain the needs of the aliens and to suggest the types of environments they would need in which to learn and thrive. Their findings were visually recorded and fed back to the local authority Building Schools for the Future teams for interpretation.

Dramatic enquiry - Aliens

Prior to taking part in this dramatic enquiry, a group of people, including myself, gathered in the design and technology room and helped create some aliens! The aliens were based on various personality traits of people. We looked at certain characteristics and finally decided on four aliens called Vol, Splodge, Strob and Loggy. Vol would be a hyperactive character, Splodge would be creative and visually impaired, Strob would be very sensible and a perfectionist, and Loggy would be quiet. Doing this made me realise that a lot of Strob's characteristics were similar to my own. It also made me think of who in the school had similar qualities to each alien we'd created. We created the aliens using plasticine and made them in a specific way, in

accordance with their personalities. We then made a video showing the aliens moving for the other students to watch later, and created their voices, which were a load of gobbledygook!

On the day of the dramatic enquiry, we gathered in Mrs Stephenson's classroom and watched a video, which included a news report from Mrs Barker about aliens landing on earth and our short alien clips we'd created before. We then used some of our 'thinking maps' to put down what we thought the aliens were like character-wise just by looking at them. I think that this dramatic enquiry helped us improve our creative skills and helped us be 'creative thinkers'!

Frances Byers, pupil

Dramatic enquiry - The Memory Box

The Memory Box dramatic enquiry took place in March 2009 during the events of Science Week. Jean played the role of a woman who had had an accident and lost all her memories. We had to try to help her remember exactly who she was. We tried doing this in various ways, such as showing her some photos of her past life, creating items that were supposed to help her remember, and showing her our own personal items, which were significant to our past. The session then concluded with images of the participants from their own childhoods.

The Memory Box activity taught us that although we have memories, some of which we can't remember, what we are like as people in the present is more important than what we were like in the past. It also expanded our thinking skills and helped us to think 'outside the box' (if you'll excuse the phrase!).

Frances Byers, pupil

End results

As a result of these initiatives, pupils have learnt how to think for themselves more and to take control of their own learning. They are more proactive about the tasks, show more confidence and, from a leadership point of view, we have had very successful external

Pupils have learnt how to think for themselves more and to take control of their own learning

reports from Investors in People, Ofsted, the University of Exeter Thinking Schools' accreditation and the National Autistic Society accreditation. These inspections and reviews have been very thorough and reflect the hard work that both staff and students have put in over the past few years.

Carolyn Barker is Headteacher of Barbara Priestman Academy in Sunderland.