

City and County of Swansea

Residencies in Action

“It gets into your soul. It’s about all those things that are intangible; about being able to make a loud noise and feeling the rhythm inside yourself.”
(Primary School Head-teacher discussing the Samba Residency)

Introduction

Schools in the City and County of Swansea have benefited from artistic residencies for a number of years. This evaluation project, undertaken by a research team from the Department of Adult Continuing Education, Swansea University, looked at residencies running from autumn 2000 until the summer of 2003. Members of the research team interviewed teachers, artists, pupils and the wider community (such as parents, carers and helpers) and undertook observations of artists working with children and end showings of work. Additionally, questionnaires were sent to all schools hosting short-term arts residencies.

The City and County of Swansea actively promotes the arts within its schools in line with its Policy for the arts in Education, prepared in 2000 and updated in 2005. Amongst other key aims it seeks to:

“...secure the arts as an integral part of education, making participation in the arts possible for all, not just through the formal education process, but through accessible opportunities for lifelong learning”.

This commitment is reflected in the innovative and exciting residencies offered to its schools. What follows is a summary of some of the key themes emerging from the evaluation study, with supporting quotations from participants.

1. Methods and Methodology

Qualitative research methods were predominantly used to analyse data, whereby semi-structured interviews took place with artists, teachers, school children and the wider community. In addition, more quantitative methods were used to ascertain the effectiveness of short-term residencies lasting two days, where written questionnaires were sent to schools. The questionnaires had closed sections where respondents rated the success of the residency according to a tick-box scenario; there were also open questions concerning teachers' experience of the residency, where more anecdotal information was given. An inductive approach was used to analyse transcripts of face-to-face interviews for longer-term residencies and identify predominant themes.

Short-term residencies were measured according to completed questionnaires received from 29 primary schools, 5 comprehensives and 1 special school. Longer-term residencies were investigated by face-to-face interviews undertaken in 6 primary schools and 2 comprehensives, where a total of 12 teachers were interviewed. In addition, 7 classes of children were interviewed to obtain their experiences of the residencies and children's parents took part in discussions with two of these schools. Seven artists were interviewed to ascertain their experiences of the residency and two co-ordinators from the City and County of Swansea Residencies in Action team gave their views. Observations of residencies also took place whereby members of the research team visited 5 schools whilst the residency were taking place to help assess the initial and mid-term impact, and 3 end-showings of work were attended and observed.

2. Summary and Key Findings

Outlined below are the most predominant themes which have emerged. However, the final report will also include secondary themes.

2.1 Arts help address gender imbalance in schools

There is a considerable concern at national level with boys' underachievement and Ofsted now includes criteria related to success in enhancing boys' performance. In this evaluation gender was

frequently referred to, especially with regard to how well boys responded to arts residencies. Many of the schools were in disadvantaged areas and teachers and artist perceived a very 'macho' male role model and a 'down-trodden woman role, or an absence of male role models due to the high number of lone mothers. A male artist was therefore considered beneficial especially in primary schools, where women traditionally out-number men.

Boys were frequently initially less likely to participate in some residencies such as the dance element of the samba residency unless there was intervention by teachers to ensure boys became involved. Having gone through this fear barrier, there were lasting benefits where some boys went on to join groups outside of school in dance, acting and music.

Primary teacher:

My class has been the focus group. Boys have responded in a way they never have before – it's been a real boon."

Head-Teacher:

Year 6 did the dancing and out of 20 dancers, between 7 and 8 were boys. There were a couple of very physical boys – I think it helped that I went in and hoiked them out to dance."

Primary School Teacher:

"...Getting boys to dance is an achievement. One boy decided he wouldn't, backed up by pressure from home where it was probably said that it was 'pansy'. The mother had said that she'd take him out, but by Monday he decided he could do it and it was fantastic. By the end, all the fathers and governors said how wonderful it was to see boys concentrating on dance."

2.2 Residencies brought specialist and innovative expertise into schools

Teachers saw artists as people who brought in specialist expertise and a dedicated focus and enthusiasm that was not otherwise available. As teachers, they were expected to have a wide general knowledge but they could not provide a true experience based upon the artist's own

processes and techniques. As a result, children saw that artists were real, live people and that art could lead to jobs.

The artist's approach was different to a teacher's approach, often starting from a less structured and more 'out of control' environment, which resulted in a few initial frustrations from teachers but was generally celebrated as an innovative method of teaching that eventually showed that structure and form occurred later.

Writer in Residence:

" Teachers tend to over-complicate in getting them to write a story. My approach is: think 'character', 'place', 'problem' - solve it."

Artists:

"Children said, 'I want to be an artist', and you realised you'd given them that idea."

"We were told to be quiet. I needed an atmosphere of being out of control to do a collage."

Teachers:

"We wanted to show children that writers are alive - not dead like Shakespeare."

"Children realise that it's a job, being a writer."

"We have to be Jack of all trades. The artist could really immerse children in his specialist area."

"I have always found that such residencies increase the range of expertise available to the children."

"Planning wasn't really his forte. It's not his fault; he's not a teacher. He's not a forward planner but he's very good at what he does. In a school, it has to be structured. A routine has to be kept to."

"It helped children gain insight into a real local artist."

"The artists were professional, inspirational and child-centred practitioners."

"I feel the school has been energised by it."

2.3 Wider benefits were seen as a contribution to a community's social capital

A stated aim of the project was to consider the impact of the residencies on social capital. Involvement in an arts project can promote a particular kind of 'citizenship' which fosters notions of responsibility towards self, others and the wider community (Matarasso, 1997). Robert Putnam, in his influential research into social capital, identified factors in a successful community as the

networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.

Thus we were interested in benefits beyond that of the formal school curriculum. Teamwork and a pride associated with collective effort was demonstrated in observations of work and class interviews. Many of these 'hard to quantify' outcomes emerged through interviews and comments in questionnaires. For example, during a visit to a primary school nearly a year after their samba residency, Year 2 pupils were asked what they remembered about the residency. The children immediately galvanised into their respective instrumental parts, remembered the vocal prompts and did an imaginary performance without instruments:

"You had to say, 'chips, fish and chips' when you hit the agogo bells."

"You did chips at the top, fish in the middle and chips at the bottom".

"I played tambourine." (He taps out the rhythm on his arm, saying, "I would like a cup of tea.")

"The shakers said, 'Chaggie, chaggie, chaggie.'"

Child involved in the dance element of the performance: "I had to remember which way to go, because they were all following me."

"I was nervous, but I did it."

"I liked the way we all did it together."

Teacher:

"It was not only educational and enjoyable but it affected the participants socially and emotionally. It was thoroughly worthwhile and should be available to all children and more often."

Artist:

"The success is the experience we gave them. When you see them all playing and dancing – that's the success – being able to give them that experience."

2.4 Residencies enabled children with behavioural and emotional difficulties to participate and shine

The impact of the arts in building social capital was also evidenced by change of attitude in children with behavioural difficulties. Feedback on this point was mixed. Schools completing the questionnaire focussing on taster residencies were not all convinced that the residencies had improved pupil behaviour with under half (16) agreeing with the suggestion. Many of the schools were undecided or did not respond to the question. However, it might be unrealistic

to expect a two-day taster residency to have a major impact on pupil behaviour.

There were responses to the interview questions which suggested that the longer term residencies did have an effect on pupil behaviour to some extent.

Samba Artist:

“One particular boy was known as a trouble maker, but during our residency he was very interested and determined. During our focus group, children were very chatty and I needed to tell them that the aim was to work as a team. The next week, this boy said, ‘I don’t know why they’re being like this, because we’re supposed to be working in a team.’ In the final feedback he said, ‘I want to do what you do when I get older.’”

“One boy who was usually on the margins of activity, heard the artist performing in another room, and said, ‘Oh he’s bloody good, isn’t he?’”

Primary School Teacher:

“One child was 75% absent until the writer in residence worked with him and he produced some very good work.”

2.5 The most successful residencies occurred when teachers and artists worked together; the teacher made wider connections within the curriculum, and facilitated end showings of work.

The most valuable residencies occurred when artists and teachers worked together and the teacher made connections with other parts of the educational curriculum. By giving a wider experience to the children, the artist’s work was given longer-term impact. In addition, end showings of work and follow-on pieces of work helped reinforce the work done by the artist. There were instances where the artist spoke about feeling isolated if their work was not integrated into the school and they found it difficult to interrupt a teacher who had used the opportunity to go and mark work or prepare another lesson. However, the value of teachers becoming involved was the more dominant experience.

Head Teacher:

“We made a big thing of the residency. It was the most major thing in the arts that we’ve done. I hope I did my bit by going in every week and saying, ‘This is brilliant.’ ”

Teacher:

"As part of the Christmas concert we did an end showing of the work. Parents were amazed at the level of performance, which was also evidenced by the standing ovation at the end."

Parents:

"It was great. The children enjoy it more if their teachers are taking part."

Stained glass artist:

"Schools paid £200 or so each for materials. Costs are high with glass, but at the end of the day they had something worth more like £1000."

"One thing I've found is that if teachers are involved in the work, it's a 100% better. Some teachers go on and teach another class or mark homework. Well you're not going to get any follow-on work from that. This teacher, when I went back, had walls and collages, writing etc. A more experienced teacher will take it on and make cross curricula connections. Involving teachers is vital, even if they say, 'I can't do art, etc'. One teacher made links with mathematics, geometry - just from the stained glass shapes."

Teacher:

"It's given us new strategies for working in this way. Children started with a story as a first draft. Later there'll be an artist for an anthology and the children will really be able to see and feel what they've done."

Artist:

"Certainly there'll be a lasting impact with the older children in Years 5 and 6. But with the younger children, if you don't reinforce it with other writers etc., it'll go."

2.6 For a residency to be seen as widely successful it must demonstrate long term impact

The research team agreed that an important criterion for successful residencies is the long term impact. It was recognised, however, that this might not be so marked in schools which had participated in two day tasters. Nevertheless it was noted that lasting impacts were mentioned by schools with both taster and longer residencies.

In some cases teachers felt that it was difficult to judge the long term impact of a residency:

“It’s very hard to say. Certainly there’ll be an impact with the older children in Years 5 and 6. But with the younger children, if you don’t reinforce it with other writers etc., it’ll go. But I tend to think with the older ones, that if they’re in a prison cell in 20 years time, they can still think, ‘I did that’.” (Primary School Teacher)

One teacher felt that there was a lasting impact:

“On character, it was immense. It will be a fantastic memory.” (Primary School Teacher)

Some Primary School children talked about their experience of Samba after the residency was over:

Boy: “I’ve got it on my mobile.”

3 other children: “So have I.”

Girl: Yes. I heard it in carnival. In Bristol.”

Boy: “Once, when I was on holiday with Grandpa in Brazil, I said to my Grandpa, ‘I recognise that sound. We did it in school’.”

It was also pleasing to note that the taster residencies also reported a long term impact in their responses to the questionnaire:

“Increased use of our nature reserve by various classes, - a follow up residency at the school funded by the Arts Council for Wales.” (Primary School)

“The pupils still talk about the project. Some Year 9 pupils went on to take Art for GCSE. They were intrigued as to what could be made from ‘rubbish’.” (Comprehensive School)

However, the following experience might reflect pressures on schools in terms of the National Curriculum and pressures to produce coursework for GCSE:

“ Unfortunately the week did not relate directly to coursework, so the experience was fairly short-lived. Although the experience of a fresh approach to art was enriching.” (Comprehensive School).

The value of Art in terms of boosting the self-esteem of pupils who are low achievers was recognised by the following head-teacher:

“ We have a very poor Year 3, ability-wise, and they need this to boost their self esteem.” (Primary School Head-Teacher)

Another Primary School teacher felt that children’s attitude towards the creative arts had been substantially enhanced:

“This is the case for all children, but especially the child with special educational needs.”

2.7 Children with special needs were offered new forms of expression and contribution through arts activity.

The team felt that the involvement with an arts residency might benefit children with special needs or who have previously been underachieving as the project can offer children alternative ways of contributing and achieving. The research team logged several ways in which the residencies were of particular benefit to pupils with special needs:

“ But one special needs child’s father mounted his poem on a piece of wood. That was special” (Artist in Primary School)

“There was one poem produced by this school’s special needs pupil, which was so good that I told him I’d be reading it in other schools. That was a great affirmation for him. Another child who said he hated English, produced a fabulous poem, which amazed everyone”. (Artist in Primary School)

“...there was one little boy who is autistic. I was told he can’t do paint. He came in at first and was screaming and banging his head when his mum left, but then he started working with clay, and became really into it. Then he worked with paint, which he’d never done before.” (Artist in Primary School)

Data from the questionnaires also suggested that pupils who were underachieving benefited from the residency. Apart from one secondary school, all schools agreed with this supposition, with over half of the schools (18) strongly agreeing. The special school teacher had this to say of one of the benefits to the school:

“To staff who were able to let children play in the environment of the beach without constantly being concerned for their safety and behaviour”

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“ We have a very poor Year 3, ability-wise, and they need this to boost their self esteem.” (Primary School Head-Teacher)

3. Recommendations for Best Practice

The recommendations that follow emerge from the Team’s research findings:

- (i) Given that the majority of schools indicated that they would not wish to change any aspects of the arts residencies, and noting the many positive reaction, the team recommends that arts residencies should be extended. Funders such as the Arts Council of Wales should look positively at applications.
- (ii) Residencies offering as wide a range of artistic activities as possible should be offered to schools.
- (iii) Ensure that any follow up activities or display materials are distributed as soon as possible after the residency to ensure maximum impact.
- (iv) It is important that schools and artists are encouraged to meet prior to, during and after the residency to ensure adequate support for the artist and the widest learning experience for pupils.
- (v) It is important to ensure that schools are able to afford the residencies. For example, travel costs might lead to some children being excluded from the residency. Possible funding applications could include funding for additional expenses such as travel.
- (vi) Schools should be encouraged to plan for dissemination after the residencies. This could be achieved through groups of schools working together.
- (vii) It is important to ensure that, as far as possible, the residencies integrate with National Curriculum requirements. This also reinforces and extends the relevance of the artist’s work and makes a more memorable experience for pupils.

- viii) It is important to see the value of the arts in addressing gender stereotyping and helping boys to achieve. Teachers should intervene and encourage boys to participate in less traditional arts activities such as dance.
- ix) The artist's process and method of teaching is often different to teachers and the most successful residencies occurred when this was appreciated.
- x) An arts residency culminating in a performance develops children's sense of collective achievement and responsibility for self and others. The success of a residency should also be measured in terms of its long-term outcomes such as the contribution to a notion of social capital.
- xi) It should be appreciated that children with poor attendance or behavioural and emotional difficulties often respond well to arts activities.
- xii) Children with special needs should be encouraged to participate since they can often find new ways of contributing and achieving, which helps boost their sense of self esteem.

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