

Half Moon Young People's Theatre **Year 6 Transitions Project**

Overview

This project uses drama and Forum Theatre techniques, over four workshop sessions, to engage 11 year olds with the issues and difficulties around the move to secondary school in a fun and creative way. The aim of the project is for participating young people to consider, in a structured and supported environment, some of the challenging issues they may face when starting secondary school.

There is a recognised and recorded decline in achievement in many young people within the first two years of secondary school and evidence that those who struggle in the first few weeks of Year 7 are affected by this for the rest of Key Stage 3.

This year, the project worked in four primary schools in Tower Hamlets (eight classes), delivered by three drama tutors. Each class received four hour-long workshops between May and July, which were tailored to their particular concerns.

Funding

The Ironmongers' Company
Action for Bow

The total project cost was £7385

Schools

Old Ford Primary, Tower Hamlets (3 classes)
Ben Jonson Primary, Tower Hamlets (3 classes)
St Luke's Primary, Tower Hamlets (1 class)
Christ Church Primary, Tower Hamlets (1 class)



Evaluation Summary

The project ran smoothly across all four schools, with many elements being successfully developed in response to the evaluation of last year's project. The young people responded well to the project, everyone learned something new about what was to come at secondary school, including exploring choices they may not have thought about before. There was an evidenced increase in young people's confidence about starting secondary school and improvements in their problem-solving skills by the end of the project. The last session left on a high note, having tackled some difficult subjects, with many young people openly sharing aspirations for secondary school and being honest about negative traits they would like to leave behind.

The delivery of the project benefitted from having some of the same team who worked on it the previous year, as the team were able to build on their learning from the previous year. It was important to return to delivering the programme in Tower Hamlets after a funding gap

last year, working with three schools that had not had the project before. This will enable Half Moon to build a strong relationship with these schools in the coming months.

Planning

The project has three Phases, spread across four sessions, and in our planning we looked to thoroughly identify what the aims and objectives were for each Phase, to ensure that what we delivered would meet these in the best possible way.

Phase 1: gathering the particular concerns and hopes of the young people about the move to secondary school. Having this information from previous years allowed us to work on Phase 2's Forum Theatre piece before delivering Phase 1, with room to make adjustments to tailor the performances as needed.

Phase 2: performing a short Forum Theatre piece, set during the first few weeks of starting secondary school, and focusing on two characters whose stories we felt particularly highlighted the issues most pressing for the young people with whom we were working. Phase 2 stretched across two sessions with each group.

Phase 3: focusing on the personal qualities the young people feel would both help and hinder them when beginning secondary school and how we can change some of our patterns of behaviour and build on others. We ended by allowing the young people to share what they are looking forward to at secondary school and what personal traits they already have that will be important in being the kind of people they want to be at secondary school. We also focused on their individual goals/objectives, and how it is ok for those to be different from the goals other people have.



This project was the first time many of the groups had addressed these issues or thought in any great detail about the reality of moving schools. In the first workshop many of the young people were brave enough to not 'go with the crowd' and be honest in their answers about how they were feeling about transitioning to Year 7. The project felt like a crucial beginning in a process of preparing the Year 6s for secondary school and this was reiterated in the answers the young people gave in the pre- and post-project questionnaires.

Forum Theatre is a way for groups to explore the issues within a play by getting actively involved, through offering an idea for how a character could change their situation and then acting out this idea. A play or series of scenes are shown as a stimulus. These introduce

characters and a storyline for them that presents a dilemma or series of dilemmas that they face, and so raises issues that are relevant to the whole group or audience that watch the play.

Once the play has finished the group are asked if they have any ideas for how the characters could do something differently in the play to change (and improve) the eventual outcome they have just witnessed. The moment in the play they have identified is re-run by the actors and they are asked to shout 'freeze' when they see an exact moment when they believe the character could say or do something differently. The person who has shouted 'freeze' is then invited to briefly explain their idea, and then come and take over playing the role from the actor. (If they do not wish to perform they can work with another member of the group who they whisper the lines to.) Once up, the scene is rewound and replayed and they put their idea into action. The job of the other actors is to respond to this change in a way they believe their characters in the play would. So if the suggestion is 'tell the bully you'll tell the teacher', the actor playing the bully might reply during the scene 'if you tell the teacher I'll get you after school'. The participant then has to improvise a response or the scene can be stopped and the whole group can be asked to help them out with ideas for how to respond.

In this way Forum allows the participants to play out ideas for dealing with situations that have faced them or may in the future in real time. It allows them to explore the difficulties of pursuing good intentions in reality, and practise for real life situations. Furthermore, it looks at some real issues they may face while keeping the process of doing this fun! Often Forum shows that solutions are not always simple, but makes it indisputably clear that changing your own situation through your own actions is always possible, if not always easy.

The Forum Theatre piece we created focused on two characters, Tom (male) and Eloise (female), whose experiences during the first few weeks of starting secondary school jointly encapsulated the majority of the concerns expressed by the groups. The scenes within the play created clear dilemmas and choices; where the choices made would clearly lead to different outcomes for their secondary school future. Tom and Eloise also play 'Ryan' and 'Sophie' (year 9 characters). Ryan's character is a bully and he uses peer pressure to encourage Sophie to act as he would and be mean to a teacher. Sophie has a scene with Tom where she tries to engage him in coming to after school try outs for the football team.

The story of Eloise was used to explore the difficulty of bullying by older students, changing her personality to fit in, and friendship dilemmas and new friend verses old friend. Tom's story looked at finding the new school environment overwhelming, finding the work difficult and how not dealing with this early and well can lead to problems down the line.

Eloise *arrives at secondary school already knowing Tom and had an older sister who has now left the school. The two older students pick on Eloise about the way she wears her school uniform and about how she's behaving and following the rules. Eloise is left feeling deflated and pressurised and decides to emulate one of the girls' appearance. She then gets bullied by the older girl and we start to see a change in her behaviour and appearance in school. She is bright and finds the work easy but starts to mess around in class and answers back and starts to get into trouble. She remains friends with Tom when they both end up in detention together and then is faced with a dilemma as Tom's 'new' friend when Tom meets up with his 'old' friend from primary school.*

Tom begins secondary school enthusiastic but nervous about all of the changes and information. He is overwhelmed by the new environment and listens to the exaggerated rumours and gets scared but tries to keep his cool. He works hard but finds some of the work difficult. This is not helped by making friends with Eloise, who seems to find work really easy. From the first maths lesson, Tom struggles with the work, but pretends that he is finding it easy. We see him put off tackling his homework and ignoring offers of help from his parents, being easily distracted by other things at home. He turns up in class the next day panicking that he hasn't done his homework and tries to copy Eloise's work but they both get caught and get a detention. He then faces a dilemma about his choices in terms of his old primary school friend and potentially new exciting friends. Tom also has a scene in the playground with 'Sophie' who tries to make friends through playing football. He is shy and doesn't come across as very friendly as a result.

Project Successes

The programme brought to the surface a very emotional subject matter for the young people. The length of the project worked really well, as it offered the young people a chance to think about things over a few weeks.

Although there was lots of bravado at first, underneath many of the young people were really quite terrified and had lots of emotions they needed to explore. We offered the young people a safe space in which to share their fears and they used it to the full. We focused on the young people having individual goals/objectives for the coming months and reiterated that it is ok for those to be different from those of other people; that no two experiences of transition will be the same. We also emphasised the need for young people to be honest with themselves and others and not allowing other people to make your decisions for you.

There were many moments in the project where the participants were particularly empathetic and showed a real sense of caring for their friends at secondary school, old and new. There were some very emotionally intelligent moments. All groups were very honest about their current behaviours in primary school now which they know they should be leaving behind, saying things such as: I want to leave behind: bullying people; being rude to the teachers; distracting people. They were also able to see their positive attributes, saying that they wanted to keep: kindness; making people laugh; being good at maths, science etc. In all groups we also had a very positive discussion around whether it is possible to achieve what we want if we hold on to negative behaviours.

We ensured that all young people knew that although our project, and particularly the Forum Theatre piece, focussed on many struggles with going to secondary, that it would be a very positive experience as they would be given responsibility and a chance to be a new person. All groups took something from the project and many took away ideas and information that they hadn't thought about before. This included how to avoid negative scenarios as well as how to deal with problems that arise.

By the end of the programme, many of the young people grew in confidence and could place themselves closer to 'really confident' when thinking about how they felt about transition and could articulate maturely why they felt more confident.

The young people who took part felt more prepared for the important transition they were about to go through. They had highlighted their concerns, felt confident talking about them and were encouraged to share those fears with their parents at home so as to ensure their parents could support them more effectively during transition. They also shared their fears with one another, meaning that if they move to secondary school with other people from their primary school they can support each other during the first few weeks. The young people explored in a practical way some scenarios that might come up in their first few weeks of secondary school, thus exploring how they might feel and what the outcome might be of different reactions and behaviours on their part which would equip them with experiences that they can refer to if challenges and difficult situations arise. It definitely helped them all to hear other people articulating that they held similar fears to them.

Monitoring

- 237 young people took part (198 in Southwark and 90 in Tower Hamlets); 127 of which were girls
- 97 of the participating young people receive Free School Meals and 233 are from an ethnic background other than White British
- 25 young people who took part in the project have special educational needs

Data Analysis of Pre- and Post-Project Questionnaires

Young people taking part in the project were all asked to complete questionnaires at the start and end of the project. Of the 237 young people who took part we have pre-project data for 216 young people and post-project data for 149 of those young people. The questions asked were the same at the start and the end of the project to see how the project impacted on the young people's feelings about starting secondary school, with particular emphasis on confidence, homework, making friends and problem-solving. Below you can see details of the six questions and analysis of the results we collected for each.

1) Thinking about how you are feeling about starting at secondary school in September, circle the one which most sounds like you at the moment:

Very nervous

A bit nervous

Not nervous or excited

A bit excited

Very excited

At the start of the project the majority of children were feeling 'a bit excited' (25%) or 'very excited' (24%) about starting secondary school, but 31% were feeling 'a bit nervous' and 7% 'very nervous'. 13% were 'not nervous or excited'.

At the end of the project the majority of children were feeling 'a bit excited' (35%) or 'very excited' (32%) about starting secondary school, but only 16% were still feeling 'a bit nervous' and only 5% 'very nervous'. 12% were 'not nervous or excited'.



Now tell us how much these statements explain how you are feeling:

2) I'm feeling confident about starting at secondary school

At the start of the project, the majority of children were feeling 'a bit' (46%) or 'definitely' (37%) confident about starting secondary school with 4% not feeling confident at all and 13% 'not really'.

At the end of the project, the majority of children were feeling 'a bit' (43%) or 'definitely' (50%) confident about starting secondary school with just 1% not feeling confident at all and 6% 'not really'.

3) I'm looking forward to starting at secondary school

At the start of the project, the majority of children were looking forward to secondary school 'a bit' (39%) or 'definitely' (52%). 8% were 'not really' looking forward to it, and 2% not at all.

At the end of the project, the majority of children were looking forward to secondary school 'a bit' (36%) or 'definitely' (49%). 13% were 'not really' looking forward to it, and 2% not at all. Though this shows an increase in fear about secondary school it perhaps also shows that some young people are now aware that some things might be very different and they will feel a little more robust to handle those differences.

4) I feel like I will be able to make new friends easily

At the start of the project, the majority of children felt they would be able to make new friends easily - either 'a bit' (40%) or 'definitely' (40%) but quite a high percentage (20%) were worried about not making friends.

At the end of the project, the majority of children felt they would be able to make new friends easily - either 'a bit' (45%) or 'definitely' (42%) but only 13% were still worried about not making friends.

5) I'm worried about there being lots of homework

At the start of the project, there was a spread regarding worries about there being a lot of homework - 'definitely' (29%) and 'a bit' (24%) but 'not really' (30%) and 'not at all' (17%).

At the end of the project, there was a similar spread regarding worries about there being a lot of homework - 'definitely' (33%) and 'a bit' (26%) but 'not really' (24%) and 'not at all' (17%).

6) I feel confident about how I will handle problems that might arise in my first weeks at secondary school

At the start of the project, the majority of children felt confident about handling problems at secondary school 'a bit' (39%) or 'definitely' (32%) but 29% were not feeling confident about problem solving ('not really' (19%) and not at all (10%).

Unfortunately, at the end of the project, these percentages remained the same as the majority of children felt confident about handling problems at secondary school 'a bit' (33%) or 'definitely' (39%) but 28% were not feeling confident about problem solving ('not really' (16%) and not at all (12%).



Evaluation: Year 6 Transitions, Summer Term 2016

Comments from Young People

134 young people wrote comments on their questionnaires to tell us what they thought of the project. 72 of those answers were things such as "I liked it" or "It was good" or "I had fun". Of the children who gave more detailed answers, 51 young people mentioned how the project had helped them and 36 said that they felt their confidence had improved as a result of the project. A further 28 young people talked about how they felt they could solve problems that might arise at the start of secondary school because of the exercises they had done in the project. 4 spoke about how the project had helped them think about how they will make friends at the start of secondary school.

I loved the role playing because it helped me in case I find any bullies.

I really enjoyed the project because I learnt how to be in secondary school and how not to be in secondary. Also, the play was amazing because it helped me.

I thought it was really helpful because now I have more confidence to face problems that will arise.

It was really fun and I learnt lots of new things like if I need help with homework I'll just ask my teacher.

I think it was really fun. I really enjoyed it so much that when I went to secondary school [on my Transition Day] I was a bit confident.

The project was really inspiring and made me more confident and if it wasn't for them I don't know what I would have done.

I thought the project helped with my fears of not being scared and how to handle problems. It was extremely useful.

I think it helped me a lot because at first my thoughts were negative but now they are positive.

I thought it was very helpful because I wasn't confident at all and I have evolved from that.

I thought this project was useful and supportive as it encourages you to make sure you start secondary school calmly and you fit in.

Making me express my feeling before secondary.

I thought the project was fun because it prepared me even more for secondary, now I understand situations that may occur and will handle them better.

Comments from Teachers

This has been a great opportunity for the whole class to really explore what they were feeling about secondary school and to be able to think about how they will cope and deal with real situations. I've seen them all grow in confidence!

(Christ Church Primary)



Evaluation: Year 6 Transitions, Summer Term 2016

Fantastic workshop that the children have certainly benefited from. We enjoyed the drama games immensely. The performances were tailored to the children's concerns and worries.
(Ben Jonson Primary)

Section from role play about what to say back to a bully to defuse the situation really got them thinking/talking. They also started talking about transition more and more openly.
(St Luke's Primary)

Thank you for the workshops, they have been great once again!
(Old Ford Primary)

Areas for Development

The following areas were identified by the team as ways to develop and improve the project, or alternative approaches to explore if it was delivered in the future:

- For some of the lower ability classes, who struggled to access the 'dilemma moments' in scenes, it may be better to break each scene up into mini scenes and ask a teacher to 'stop' the action with a suggestion that they can then model and from which they can follow on.
- Understanding some of the processes and procedures that are in place in the secondary schools to which they are moving with regard to reporting bullying.
- A further development in the structure of the project, to fully embed the idea that the teachers continue the work about transition during and beyond the sessions led by Half Moon, would be to timetable a fifth session that would be led by the class teacher or TA attached to the project in response to the four Half Moon delivered sessions. This session could ask the young people to act out some scenes for the rest of the class to the use Forum Theatre and parents could be invited to take part.
- Possibly having some Year 7s attend one of the workshop sessions to discourage a lot of the 'bravado' of the Year 6s and to help the Year 6s understand how different secondary school is going to be.

Conclusion

The project was a clear overall success, meeting the aims and objectives outlined in the planning. Further evaluation from this year undoubtedly means that the project would continue to grow in strength if it were to run again. The Forum Theatre technique proved successful as a practical and active way for young people to start to explore some of the issues related to transition. Through the Forum and role-play it allows them to explore the consequences of their actions and choices, in a safe and supported environment.