

6e. Case studies - planning around Big Brum's work

The following case studies come from work in three West Midland Schools, carrying out extended work with Big Brum around the 2013-14 programme '*Touched*.' These three quite different ways of planning around the Company's work have proved productive for the schools in terms of outcomes for young people, professional development, and against school development objectives. They all suggest ways in which your school might think about developing extended work around '*The Angry Roads*.'

A lengthier case study – from Golden Hillock School - can be found as Appendix 7d of this Teachers' Resource. Further case studies can also be downloaded from our website.

Planning for transition: Kingsbury School and Sports College, Birmingham

"I've never seen Year 7 pupils grow up so quickly as I have through this play."

- Form Tutor.

"I wish all our lessons were a bit like this"

- Year 7 pupil

Big Brum worked across the Autumn Term with a new Year 7 intake and their form tutors (most of whom were also new to their support role). In exploring themes of change and transition within the drama, the aim was to create a space where young people could explore significant questions in their own changing lives.

Kingsbury is an inner city school, and many of the young people were from families whose lives had been touched by events similar to elements in the drama: the 2012 riots, teenage pregnancy, complex or problematic relationships with parents and elders. We therefore expected the drama to speak to them in particular ways, and to give them a clear framework within which they could articulate their felt understanding of the drama, thereby developing their communications and interpersonal skills.

The whole year group experienced the TIE programme for *Touched*, and the Company worked closely with form tutors to explore ways in which the young people might be supported afterwards, via the school's 'Learning for Life curriculum'. This work ranged from photography projects to written work, performance, and even food technology. Some work from young people in response to the programme was shared with Year 5 children from feeder schools at two events in December.

Dear Diary...

I am very confused, because today I asked my dad how my mother died. He said she died in a car accident. He always says this but I don't believe him. He will never look at me; there is something in his eyes. He always turns his back on me when he talks about it. Today I was determined to find out more. I was about to ask him again, but he went out. I thought about it a lot. Soon I got bored and looked through my shoebox containing my baby stuff. Was he telling me the truth or was he lying to me? I don't understand. Sometimes I think he is telling the truth, but I also think he is lying to me. I don't know what to believe.

Diary in role, as part of sharing presentation - Y7 girl, Kingsbury

The project had complex and multiple outcomes, for a range of people in the school community.

The young people in Year 7

"Some of those who spoke at the sharing event had the weakest literacy skills but were able to speak as part of a presentation. Not one child was put down. Every child who wanted to participate was able to participate. It involved everyone. The children were given safety mechanisms for the deep issues that were coming out. Ofsted commented on how good the work was." – Deputy Head.

"Children who would not normally want to be in school chose to stay on. It shows that they were enjoying and valuing what they were doing. It boosted a sense of self-worth, partly due to the contribution that the students made: being able to choose, being student led, not being controlled by the teacher." – Form Tutor.

"I wish all our lessons were a bit like this, more calm, with people more focused ... They [Big Brum] give you tips how to be better at something. They don't shout. They tell us what to improve on." – Year 7 pupils.

Form tutors

"There was some negativity at the first session, but it changed during the course of the session. Now that people have seen what the young people did, they understand what is involved. Work of this kind needs time allocated. The form tutors have become more flexible, able to think outside the box. Willing to share ideas, pool ideas and planning differently." – Deputy Head.

*"It meant teachers having to think outside **their** box and comfort zone." – Form Tutor.*

"Students were fully engaged. It touched on topics people normally avoid with students because they're young. This is a theatre company who bring real life issues into play, who work with young people on issues that affect them." – Form Tutor.



Touched in performance

A cross-curricular 'lesson in life': Wood Green Academy, Sandwell

"They were invigorating and professional. They have a positivity and passion."

- Deputy Head.

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"It was a mature script, could really happen, giving us a lesson in life ..."

- Year 9 student

The school wanted to use something with a contemporary, 'current affairs' dimension as a focus for cross-subject planning in Years 8 and 9. Planning coherently in this way can be challenging in a large secondary school. Big Brum therefore began its work with large group performances for Year 8 and Year 9 students, followed up by short but intensive workshops as part of an off-timetable SHAPE day (where PSHE was the main focus). The Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills from QCA formed a valuable framework in underpinning this work.

This work was then picked up by the English and Drama departments across the following term, who carried out more in-depth work on the text of *Touched ...* including working on a new English Scheme of Work with the play's writer, Chris Cooper, and using the script as the key text for the Drama mock exams. The Actor Teachers from Big Brum ran some short follow-up sessions with form groups, picking up on the PSHE elements.

Drama

The project grew out of previous work that Big Brum had done with the school's well-established Drama department. The department *"wanted to raise the profile of theatre within the school."* As the work proceeded, they noted that this was *"a real gritty performance and very poignant for the students. It's thrown up a lot of questions."* For the subject itself, *"I think it has invigorated our teaching and way of presenting text."*

The Head of Drama wrote later that *"their plays have inspired the most disengaged of students. As well as performances they provided workshops for our students, which improved their marks in coursework assessments and gave them the focus to carry them through to greater success in their external exam. Big Brum don't only impact on students socially and emotionally but they have an impact on their academic achievement as well."*

English

Associate Head of English: *"Through engaging in workshops, students were able to explore wider social issues and draw upon this in the English classroom. Focused workshops with Big Brum colleagues supported students in their academic studies, whilst sustaining a holistic understanding of their area of study."*

PSHE

Assistant Head of History: *"My form were engaged by the play – one pupil, who had been absent, even asking for a copy of the play after other pupils told them about it. The delivery of the play was not only very thought provoking but for the majority of pupils in*

my form this was their first experience of a live 'theatre' performance. However the key strength of Big Brum wasn't simply the performance but the workshops that they delivered during form time and then on a second SHAPE day. These follow up activities were challenging and engaging. Pupils in my form who are very disaffected from the education process came alive and volunteered ideas and engaged in the process. All the pupils in my form who I spoke to about Big Brum were very positive and continue to feel able to ask challenging questions ... Big Brum are able to engage with pupils on a different level to that of teachers."

Across the curriculum

The Deputy Headteacher felt that the project had met its broader outcomes. *"While it was originally about Drama, it has opened up the possibilities for cross-curricular working - English, RE, SHAPE. I'm really pleasantly surprised at the amount of communication with all parties. Big Brum has lit the blue touchpaper and enabled staff to develop a wider approach."*

Looking at the work as a whole, a Drama teacher talked of *"The far-reaching impact of this programme ... Young people need the projects Big Brum can provide in order to challenge, develop and explore their thinking. Big Brum allow all pupils to share a voice in a safe environment; they have successfully supported learners who have Special Educational Needs and have thoroughly captivated the disengaged. Your work must be valued and appreciated today for the changes it makes for tomorrow."*

The young people

"The difference in discussion with students was tangible when Big Brum was present. Students were far more willing to open up and expand on their answers."

- Form teacher

"Our learners have been given many opportunities to develop their opinions about subjects that actually matter, reflecting on high quality theatre and being actively challenged to develop their thought processes on themes and issues that directly apply to them in our contemporary society."

- Drama teacher

As anticipated, the students enjoyed the 'grown-up'-ness of the plays themes, including its difficulty. They felt that they had risen to its challenges: *"I think it's shown teachers that we can be mature and cope with serious scripts ... it gave us something to push for - kept us motivated ... It was a mature script, could really happen, giving us a lesson in life ... At times it was a bit difficult to understand what was happening, and then something would just click, and it would make sense ... It was really relevant and gives you something to go away and think about."*



Touched – the value of a life?

Something to talk and write about: Hamstead Hall Academy

"It taught me about life, to question – that someone else won't always give the answer."

- Year 10 student

"What makes this work difficult is what is the most positive thing about it: the culture of constraints meets the culture of flexibility and responsiveness."

- Assistant Head

Hamstead Hall is a North Birmingham school, where Big Brum had regularly worked previously with the Drama department and in support of off-timetable days. This term-long project went beyond these previous experiences, and involved working closely with the school's 'learning champions' – a group of experienced teachers with a responsibility for developing teaching approaches within the school.

The school had identified an issue about the use of appropriate language register in young people's spoken and written work. Starting with 'Touched' as a stimulus, Big Brum worked closely with these teachers to frame follow-up tasks where young people would not only have something powerful to talk about, but opportunities to use appropriate forms of language. The intention in turn was to inform the 'champs' work in curriculum development, and in supporting their peers.

Before starting work with the young people, we worked closely with the 'champs': building up relationships, and using workshops to explore sections of the play, including constructing its imaginary site (as in Section 6a of this resource). From here, we were able to identify particular opportunities within the RE and Year 10 Drama curricula, and focused our main attentions on these two subjects.

Drama

'Touched' was used as a text with Year 10 Drama groups, with whom we also did follow-up workshops. This resulted in some measurable outcomes.

"Drama homeworks show a marked improvement. Much better quality work than previous years: at least a grade higher than the previous year. At the upper end we saw much better work, more detailed: if this was a controlled assessment in Year 11, this Year 10 work would be getting a 'B'. Students have been producing a large volume of work – they would not normally be doing such long, detailed homework." – Head of Drama.

For 'lower ability' students, such as a boy who came into the year with a Level 3 English assessment, the work gave them *"the confidence to speak and write about the ideas they had ... someone else won't always have the answer."*

Religious Education

'Touched' was used as a stimulus to support a unit around 'the value of life'. This included drama inputs into lessons that explored moments from the play where the protagonists have a choice about killing, dying and risking themselves for others. A

new scheme of work has since been developed around this unit, building on the joint work.

"More students achieved the baseline than might have been expected. We even had some A grades that would not have been expected. Students were able to articulate a three mark answer, and this would normally be the case. There was a lot of higher order questioning, in order to move things on."* - RE Teacher.

Formal language register

During the project, the young people's language developed in demonstrable ways, although all parties recognised that more work – and more than a term - would be needed in order to establish the sort of progress that the school was looking for in the long term.

"It might not always be the most academic of registers, but they've got something to write about. This process in Drama is mirrored in RE." – Assistant Head.

"You need the sort of higher order questioning we had in order to move language on to that higher, more formal register." – RE teacher.

Professional development

The RE teacher we were planning with particularly valued the Company's approach to questioning. *"It was a complete other level to see how the Actor Teachers worked. How do they do that? ... And then beginning to develop my own approaches. We got away from closed questioning, found ways to work more creatively with the students: not just telling them how to do it. More 'what do you think?' questions. The quality of talk in the room really improved, and they seemed to be enjoying it more at the same time."*

The Head of Drama developed a series of four sessions with a SEN group of Year 8/9 students, many of whom were on 'P' levels. These were modelled on the introductory workshops that Big Brum had led with the 'champs.' After looking around the school at real alleyways, the students worked together to construct the alleyway site of the play.

The work was successful: *"It built their confidence. In the final lesson, running from the riot and finding the shoes, they kept wanting to have another go. It built their confidence in performance (including one boy who was usually reluctant), and in their language: having something to talk about."*

Young people

In addition to the formal outcomes outlined above, the young people appear to have valued the experience: *"It taught me about life, to question – that someone else won't always give the answer ... but I can find the answer."* (Y10 Drama student).