

Learning from the Bringing People Together Programme 2021-2024

Case Study – Assemble (National Youth Theatre)

“Watching the development of the young people over a few short months, I can see the impact had by the time they get to spend being playful and creative, and challenging themselves to push the limits of what they thought they were capable of. We've witnessed singers, dancers, poets, and comedians emerging from behind shrouds of shyness and self-doubt: it's a joy and an inspiration.” (Assistant on Assemble, London)

Background

The National Youth Theatre (NYT) has a long track record of work on inclusion and widening access to theatre for all young people, as well as creating pathways into careers in the creative sector for young people who may not have seen this as an option for them. For example, they had previously delivered programmes in several non-mainstream schools, and had also worked with neurodivergent young people. The aims and approach of the BPT Programme were well aligned with the organisation's ethos and beliefs, in particular the emphasis on coproduction and young people's voices shaping the work - and the understanding that this would demand a responsive, flexible approach. BPT also offered an opportunity to build on and develop their existing experience in a sustainable way, and over a longer period than in the past, where programmes had typically been funded on a very short-term basis.

Assemble aims to:

- **build connections** between disabled and non-disabled people and communities
- **instil confidence** in disabled young people to engage with their local area and make use of the resources it contains
- **drive lasting social and policy changes** at the local level, guided by their voices and experiences

Creative workshops and cultural visits are the two main elements of the project, drawing on NYT's history of establishing creative spaces to inspire young people and make change happen. It aims to widen the experiences and networks open to young disabled people, introducing

them to new people, cultural venues such as theatres and galleries, and other community opportunities. Assemble works in non-mainstream schools, as the setting that feels most familiar to young disabled people, as well as offering a way to reach large numbers of potential participants. Key partners include cultural institutions, local authorities, statutory services, and grassroots organisations. A local steering group is in place in each of the three areas where Assemble is operating: Manchester, Wales and London. The steering groups bring together D/deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent young people, local community organisations, cultural venues, and key local stakeholders. Their role is focused on achieving local change by sharing learning and improving access.

Assemble is delivered by very diverse local teams made up of several different roles. They include disabled and neurodiverse practitioners and assistants, as well as volunteer buddies, young people from the local area who act as mentors for the disabled young people.

What has happened?

By Spring 2024, Assemble had engaged 120 young people across the three locations, as well as over 40 volunteers.

Creative workshops

The young people have all taken part in creative workshops at their school. The content of the workshops was shaped by the young people themselves, and included art, drama, music and dance. Workshops were designed to link with the cultural experiences described below, and feed into and/or follow up these visits. The workshops have taken the themes of 'self' (term 1) and 'ensemble' (term 2), to build self-knowledge and then move towards building a connection with others.

The workshops also introduced new and different people (from the delivery team and from other schools) as well as new experiences.

Cultural experiences

Cultural experiences have included young people from two London schools going to the Kiln Theatre in Brent to see a 'chilled performance' of Aristophanes 'The Frogs', a visit to see The Jungle Book at Factory International for two of the Manchester schools, and a third Manchester group visiting Gallery Oldham. In Wales, two schools saw The Diary of an Ugly Duckling and a third school took part in a creative workshop on the main stage of the Swansea Grand Theatre on the theme of environmental destruction. In each case, NYT worked with the venue beforehand to make sure they were prepared to welcome a group of young disabled people, as well as preparing the young people for the experience. They also travelled to the venue together.

What was unexpected?

The young people loved having new and interesting people in their space.

“The young people loved having new and interesting people in their space.” (Project lead)

“The community aspect of the programme has been amazing, there are genuine friendships forming between the young people and the volunteers. People who wouldn’t even speak the first session are now the first to volunteer to perform – it’s incredible.’ (Assistant, London).” (Assistant on Assemble, London)

At the start, NYT anticipated that the main focus of the work would be about access, but in fact, it soon became clear that the **role of the volunteer buddies** was central in helping to open up new connections and experiences. Some of the young people had not met anyone outside their immediate family and school circle and very rarely went out beyond their home and school. They were curious and interested in the volunteer buddies, asking them about being adults; what they do for work, for fun and what thought about topical issues.

There were also some unexpected moments with **young people saying what they wanted** to do. For example, a group in Wales wanted to create a performance on the theme of home and Wales, while a group of disabled young people wanted to dance.

What has been the impact?

“I want to thank you all for this. It's really touched my heart, and I like you all very much. It's really made my life better, knowing you all.” (Participant)

Assemble creates **opportunities for disabled and non-disabled people to meet, collaborate, and make meaningful connections**. This is evident in the young people’s relationships with the volunteers, as highlighted in the quote from a young person, above, and also in the volunteers who have moved into assisting roles on the programme or taken on other inclusion-focused work, including 1:1 support roles in SEND schools and creative support work.

This can also be seen in the joy of these groups attending cultural events together, **building friendships and understanding through shared experiences**. After a trip to see Sister Act, one parent shared how meaningful it was to see their child engaged socially: *“Thank you so much for the opportunity to attend Sister Act with E... It was so lovely to see her interacting with people she had met before at the NYT workshops. She was still smiling this morning and, despite a very late bedtime, was up for school on time, excited to share her experience with anyone who would listen!”*

Greater self-confidence and sense of agency among young people

“(The most significant change for young people is) seeing the connections, with each other, volunteers, delivery teams, venues and their ability to advocate for themselves and speak about what they want.” (Project lead)

“This experience has made me more confident and open-minded when I am on stage. Working with (NYT) made me feel happy because I can express myself through acting and performing in front of an audience and getting a reaction out of them (in a good way).” (Participant, Manchester)

Assemble has **improved the self confidence** of the young people who took part in the programme. Young people themselves, and the teachers who see them every day have commented on the impact, with a Manchester Head Teacher saying *‘All the feedback has been wonderful, I so thank you all so much!’* Young person comments have included *‘that was so fun!’*, *‘we worked so well together as a team and I was happy to take my turn,’* *‘I don’t usually like acting in front of people but that was fun!’*

The project has also **expanded young peoples’ horizons** and sense of possibility. For example, the theatre trip was the first time some of the young people in London had used the underground, while most of the Manchester group had never before been out in the city centre in the evening.

Meeting the Assemble team, including the buddies, also meant that the young people started thinking more about the world of work and independent adult life.

Shared learning and increased expertise

“It’s such a learning based project – you need to adapt, and change, and learn.”

Assemble has provided a platform for **a network of people to come together**, who are all committed to improving inclusion, sharing what they are doing, and building a better understanding of what good looks like. Previously there was no real focus for people who were interested

in work of this kind, so practitioners were isolated and there were few opportunities for learning and development. Assemble has provided this focus, and there is now an established network of like-minded practitioners in place.

Building this network of volunteers and facilitators, many of whom are disabled and neurodivergent themselves, is helping to realise the aim of bringing people together. By sharing their lived experience and expertise in the organisations they engage with, these facilitators become visible **creative role models for young people**.

In addition, volunteers inspired by their involvement with Assemble have moved on to other roles or paid work in the sector with a focus on inclusivity, so Assemble has **helped to build wider capacity** for this kind of work.

By building everyone's understanding of what it takes effectively to plan and develop suitable programmes for disabled and neurodivergent young people, Assemble helps sustain these opportunities and **drive lasting change**. The project's work with key partners has also brought councils, institutions, and venues together to learn from young people's experiences. For example, the Assemble team is working with partners including LiFT and Islington Council to develop an Access Passport that will equip councils and employers with tools to better support disabled and neurodivergent people.

What have they learned?

Building trust and relationships is a key first step

Assemble has drawn on **existing connections and relationships** in developing their work. For example, in Wales, the steering group is rooted in existing community infrastructure, and has also played a key role in bringing different people and organisations together, strengthening previous networks through their work together. As noted above, the strong connection between the young people and their volunteer buddies has played an important role in the project, with buddies acting as role models and a new group of peers.

Young disabled people will fly if you give them the opportunity

"I was scared before we went (out to the theatre). Now I think 'let me go again!'"

Increasing disabled **young peoples' sense of what is possible** for them has been an important part of the project. For example, one young woman initially said: *'I want to be a writer, but I'll never do that'*. Now she's writing a script.

Other young people are now keen to go out more, and make the most of what their communities have to offer.

Organisations vary in their willingness to engage

“It’s a vicious circle – the community isn’t accessible, so disabled people don’t go out, so organisations don’t see they need to change.”

Some cultural venues were very keen to be involved in Assemble, providing facilities such as quiet areas, more wheelchair spaces than usual, and setting up spaces flexibly to accommodate disabled young people. Others, however, were much **less willing to engage** and were not prepared to go the extra mile to make sure that young disabled people could easily access their space.

Communities and organisations may not be ready to accept and include disabled young people

Even though supporting young disabled people to make the most of cultural opportunities required a huge amount of planning, there were still problems, for example with public transport, as **accessibility is still under-developed** in many places.

NYT also found that even in non-mainstream schools there was sometimes a lack of suitable space within schools that could easily accommodate the numbers of young people and volunteers who were involved in a creative workshop.

What next?

“What happens when it shifts from being allowed in a space to being our space?” (Project lead)

“(Assemble) will be an excellent programme to see development over time and yet another opportunity for our young people to explore their independence and creative skills, feel connected with their peers and to access their community and creative opportunities with growing independence.” (Staff member, London school)

The Assemble team has been taking lessons from the project into the wider work of the NYT, to **strengthen the focus on inclusion**, and in particular, on keeping the voices of young people at the heart of all they do. This will in future be helped by NYT's partnership with London Metropolitan University Centre of Ethics, who have been capturing and sharing best practice from the project.

They also aim to expand **work opportunities and pathways** in the creative sector for young disabled people, at the same time as fun!

The three Assemble steering groups are continuing to work with venues to **increase accessibility** and widen the opportunities available to disabled young people to enjoy cultural and creative opportunities alongside other young people. Assemble is tapping into the growing appetite for inclusion by strengthening accessibility understanding and addressing concerns about barrier removal, in line with their three core aims.

In addition, young people's increased confidence in accessing the cultural sector is **leading to changes informed directly by their input**. For example, next term, the London cohort will speak directly with the National Theatre teams to influence their inclusion policies. These new cohorts of practitioners and participants are contributing to lasting change within the local cultural sector.