



TIM BRAY THEATRE COMPANY

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Extraordinarily Creative Drama Classes – Term 1 (Pilot term) 2021 Report

Tim Bray Theatre Company launched its first ever Extraordinarily Creative Drama Classes in Term 1 2021 (9 February – 16 April) at Meadowood Community House, Unsworth Heights with the generous support of the Stewart Germann Grant, administered by the Cognition Education Trust.

The venue was selected on advice from Children’s Autism Foundation, who suggested the North Shore as a location where they had connections with a large number of families who would be interested attending classes on the North Shore.

Extensive preparation for the classes was undertaken to ensure the programme’s success and tutors were contracted specifically for these classes, with the diverse skillset required front of mind.

Our Extraordinarily Creative lead tutors Holly and Jeanita are experienced qualified drama teachers who are also able to call on their own personal experiences of working with neurodiverse youth. Their understanding of how to allow students to be their natural selves in the classroom is the key, and Jeanita and Holly provide a safe place for students to connect, to be playful, to be imaginative.

Both the lead and assistant tutors completed a CAF workshop to equip them with the tools to successfully run the classes. To ensure a wide range of whānau were aware of the programme, Extraordinarily Creative classes were promoted through several channels: To both our public audience and to schools via general newsletters and targeted emails, through other organisations, such as CAF and Arts Access Aotearoa, and through relationships with special schools and other relevant community groups. Whānau interested in enrolling their students were asked to complete an application form that included a series of questions to understand the child’s needs, and were invited to apply for a scholarship, if required.

CAF helped assess applications and advised on whether or not the classes would be appropriate for the child’s needs and abilities. The programme was supported by our Youth Theatre Outreach Manager, Madeleine Lynch.

We had a total of 23 enrolments across four age bands, averaging 5-6 out of a maximum of seven students per class. 8 children came from outside of the North Shore area. Two financial scholarships were awarded in Term 1, and these scholarship recipients have returned in Term 2.

One of the big learnings from the pilot programme, is the need to expand to different parts of Auckland. We had a number of scholarship requests for South Auckland, but the travel

time to the venue would not have been ideal for the child, and may have created additional anxiety, negating the positive impact of the class. On advice from CAF and after speaking it through with the parents involved, we declined applications where travel time would have been excessive. However, we are working on funding opportunities to extend the programme to a South Auckland venue in the future.

Classes were 1 hour long and use opening and closing routines combined with flexible class planning to incorporate current interests with set activities. Classes begin by coming together in a circle to discuss how they are feeling that day, with younger groups using a visual cue (a Lego person feelings chart) and are invited to share their views on a topic. Younger classes then typically move on to a repeated set of favourite drama games, with the flexibility to change plans to follow an interest. Older groups often work in teams and create skits and work on other group activities that foster team building, interaction and communication. At the end of each class, the group returns to the circle for a check in and discussion.

Please note, while we often use a professional photographer to document our Youth Theatre classes, we have chosen not to photograph our Extraordinarily Creative classes in the first term, as our priority was to ensure they were settled and comfortable and the intrusion of being photographed may have inhibited their progress. As such, we are unable to provide photographs of the classes.

Meeting Key Outcomes

Feedback on the classes from parents was overwhelmingly positive, with 90% of respondents to the Parent Survey agreeing that the Extraordinarily Creative drama classes had supported their child's in-school learning or behavior.

School learning improvements range from social/emotional growth:

"[child's name] enjoys drama which makes her feel happier in general. She also has something to talk about with her class and peers when she can tell them all about attending drama classes."

To communication skills and confidence that directly improves class participation:

"He improved in communication so much, so his learning improved in the classroom."

"He is more confident to engage in verbal/ presentations in class."

In our survey to parents, we asked them to provide a 5-star rating for how well the Extraordinarily Creative Drama Classes supported their child's development in a variety of key areas.

Communication

Improved verbal communication skill and self-expression received a 5 Star rating. This was the most universal improvement, with all parents noticing a marked difference. Comments included:

"The tutors try to listen and understand [child's name]. It makes him express himself more confidently."

"[child's name] is very confident at drama because she can relax and be herself without having to adapt to social norms."

"[Child's name] finds it hard to articulate his feelings. This class has given him a safe space of like-minded people to help him work in these skills."

"[child's name] happily talks all the way home about what they achieved in the class that day. It's a 45-minute drive!"

Confidence

Building confidence received a very high score of 4.9 and parents noted improvements in confidence sharing in a classroom environment, and initiating conversations with their peers:

"[Child's name] even chose to do his class speech without prompting this year - first time ever!!!! And he did it all in his alter-ego of a hippo!!!!"

"I believe [child's name] is starting to show a huge growth on this area and we are seeing changes right across the board with her. She has introduced herself to a girl in her Monday lunchtime swimming class. That's huge for her."

Social Skills

Social skills and competencies, which, it was explained, could include making appropriate eye contact, smiling, showing empathy, understanding different points of view, polite language, etc., scored 4.8 out of 5. This hugely positive outcome was achieved through the opportunity provided for participating children and young people to 'practice' these skills through activities in the classes. Being with a group of peers who are also neurodiverse has helped these children and young people feel relaxed and accepted, which may have led to them being more comfortable practicing social techniques in a safe environment.

"Kids are very good at imitating others. He is learning social skills and verbal and non-verbal skills from the input the teachers of drama class give."

“[Child’s name] engages more readily in dinner conversations and shares his views. Cracks jokes and often clears mum and dad’s dinner plate without being asked. Engages with his little brother (2.5 years).”

Friendships

Developing Friendships scored slightly lower at 4.2, although still a very high score. Many parents acknowledged that this would be a slower process and so friendships may form later on. However, in comments above on verbal communication and self-expression, and in building confidence, we can see that parents acknowledge skills gained in relation to how they interact with their peers, which will support them in developing friendships in the future. In addition, the parents are not in the classes themselves and the tutors have noted, particularly in the older classes, that the groups are tight-knit, working together as a team and communicating with each other as friends. They noted that while there can be frustrations in the class, they can talk about their feelings and move past it during the class and are developing strong connections with each other.

Self-regulation and Executive Functioning

Self-regulation and executive functioning scored 3.2 out of 5. This was the lowest score of all the competencies, but still showed improvement overall. Comments discussed incremental change, and this may be something that develops slowly as the children continue with the classes. Within class, teachers had noticed improvements across the term, with children showing big improvements in following class routines and managing emotions by noticing and verbalising how they feel.

“[Child’s name] is listening and focusing more in the class. He can follow the directions and tries to join the task he is given, with the warm support from teachers. His tantrum is getting reduced as he builds rapport with teachers.”

“[Child’s name] still struggles in this area but I am sure the classes are having a positive impact on her in this area.”

Other Outcomes

We have been overwhelmed with the feedback from parents on the positive impact of the classes.

There have also been small wins that have made a big difference. When Auckland went into to a Level 3 lockdown in late February, classes were moved to Zoom in order to continue the learning, maintain connection with the students and provide a stimulating activity through what for many was a tough event. Youth Theatre had been moved to the zoom platform during previous lockdowns, so the teachers already had experience, and classes were received very positively. Despite the challenges:

"I just wanted to feed back to you that is the most animated I have seen [child's name] on a Zoom/Meet since Covid started! It is his most hated thing and he has barely interacted at all in any other sessions at anytime, yet with your skills, understanding, patience and most of all knowledge about ASD you got him to not only interact, but interact for the whole hour!!!! Just wow!!!!"

One of the biggest outcomes that parents have noted has been improved wellbeing and belonging developed while participating in an environment that respects their uniqueness and allows them to be who they are, and from the comfort derived from meeting and being around like-minded peers.

"it is awesome to be in an environment where the kids (and the parents) can express their individuality and be greeted with acceptance, kindness and friendship - no judgement and a true appreciation of life with a unique child"

"It has been brilliant. So helpful to have people and a group to belong to which he never had before."

"The drama class has been the BEST thing I have ever signed [child's name] up for - and he's done a HUGE number of things. I have never seen [child's name] so excited to attend anything before - he will get himself ready on time and ensure he is not late. He often wants to walk to class by himself (we live nearby) and will leave at least 10 minutes early to ensure he is not late. Drama clashes with some other activities but [child's name] has made it clear he does not want to miss drama and will miss other activities instead. The enthusiasm with which he goes and then the beaming smile afterwards is priceless - he was never this enthusiastic with any other class he has attended. I think he just finds joy and comfort in being with like-minded peers, not having to 'mask' in class and just being totally himself. I would sign him up for the next 10 years if I could."