

Thinking Creatively About Creativity

How Westdene Primary School in Brighton has approached arts education in the challenging climate of Covid-19.

The joint chief executives of the National Theatre, Lisa Burger and Rufus Norris also stated in 2020 that *“Creativity is not a ‘nice to have’. We need an education system fit for the future – and it must be one that champions this country’s creativity as the foundation of its economic and social health.”*

President Barack Obama re-iterated this message, saying *“The future belongs to young people with an education and the imagination to create.”*



At Westdene, we have always been champions of the arts and like to believe it is as much a part of our ethos as the lettering that runs through a stick of Brighton rock. We firmly believe that creativity is as crucial to developing successful learning. Like every school in the country, we have found the last eighteen months hugely challenging with all the restrictions in place around Covid-19. However, as a team, we deepened our resolve and determination to ensure that the arts would continue to thrive at our school.

This article has enabled us not only to reflect on the successes of the past year and a half, but also to come together to consider and hone our vision for the future.

Our Move to Remote Learning

During the two lockdowns, we viewed it as imperative to offer our pupils their entitlement to a rich cultural and creative curriculum which would underpin both their academic progress and support their mental well-being. We quickly appointed a leader of remote digital learning, and this enabled us to ensure consistency and quality of experience across the school. Art, Music and French continued to be taught every week alongside core subjects, and our Forest School continued to work with Key Worker children throughout the school closure period. Moreover, we wanted to minimise the amount of time our students were required to be in front of a screen.

Sara Vaughan, Leader of Remote Digital Learning writes:

“All staff were encouraged and expected to set home learning offering regular creative tasks that were both accessible and meaningful to the children and families at home. From model making and photography challenges linked to science, to creating Egyptian artefacts, digital Warhol inspired images, recording musical

compositions to designing and producing café menus in French, the children were offered a range of creative tasks in their learning across the curriculum.”

Art For Arts’ Sake: Sharing and Celebrating

It was wonderful to see class online forums sharing their personal artwork for arts’ sake. At Westdene, we use three different digital platforms; Tapestry for our youngest pupils in EYFS, DB Primary in KS1 and Google Classroom in KS2. These systems have enabled immediacy and allowed everyone to share creativity, artwork and photos. This facilitated a strong online sense of community. We used the platforms to share ideas, stories, songs, inspirational photos and home learning ideas with our parents and carers, making sure we were all in touch and feeling connected, and in that way, families and children could gain inspiration from one another.

Westdene arts team member, Amanda O’Flaherty commented:

“Sending home learning ideas to families over lockdowns and for children who were self-isolating inspired our families to see how easy it is to learn and have fun in the home environment. We hoped that these home learning ideas have resonated and continued to impact through families organically learning and creating art together using whatever was at hand.



Time with parents is always the most precious and appreciated part of growing up for our youngest children. It was important for families to be actively having fun, being creative and keeping their spirits up. Here at Westdene we were amazed at how our families responded with their home learning, how much the children enjoyed and achieved and how resilient our families were.”

She adds: *“It made us think and act on our feet! It has changed practice overnight, sometimes in very positive and unexpected ways.”*



Cultural Enrichment Days

Our Arts Team worked together to plan special events. Sara Vaughan writes:

'We were able to continue to create cultural enrichment tasks for the children to enjoy on a tri-weekly basis as part of our 'Catch up Friday' and 'Celebration assembly' days. We have always offered these enrichment days as an integral part of the school calendar but wanted to continue to do this which meant thinking about how it could be best delivered in a remote setting.'

Our first project entitled 'Our World View' offered a wealth of creative tasks to explore the idea of cultural identity, and more specifically Asia.

This prepared the children well for our second project which coincided with Chinese New Year Celebrations which gave explored aspects of Chinese New Year traditions. The children created lanterns, practised Chinese script, made Origami, filmed Dragon Dancing and cooked traditional Chinese food. The digital material to scaffold this was collated from a variety of sources and presented created using www.bookcreator.co.uk and the children shared their outcomes through our digital platforms and padlets.

Other Whole School Projects: Book Cover Double & Westdene World Buffet

Other projects included our #Bookcoverdouble challenge, inspired by the NYC Getty Museum (<https://blogs.getty.edu/iris/getty-artworks-recreated-with-household-items-by-creative-geniuses-the-world-over>), and our 'Westdene World Buffet' which was a creative exploration of world foods to coincide with Harvest celebrations and food bank donations. (<https://westdenepriamry.co.uk/brighton-hove/primary/westdene/site/pages/schoollife/creativity/westdenebuffet2020>)

The benefit of this kind of arts-based work was not only the fantastic impact evidenced by pupil outcomes, but also the sheer joy of the tasks; the pleasure and wellbeing derived by both pupils *and* staff from sharing them on collaborative platforms such as Padlet, and through celebration webinar assemblies held regularly via Zoom. The opportunity to connect and share, and to enjoy the creativity on display was both comforting and motivating in a very isolated period.

Inclusivity and accessibility

We conjured up lots of amazing home learning ideas by thinking carefully about what ALL children would have to hand at home. We made collages from natural objects found on the daily walk and shadow pictures of objects on sunny days. Nursery children painted walls with water only to watch with wonder as their pictures evaporated away! Our youngest children made sock puppets to sing with, played music on pots and pans and used loose parts to make pictures and sculptures. We were able to satisfy our green credentials by thinking of ways that waste could be used to conjure up art. We used empty food boxes to make shops for imaginative role play, used home delivery boxes to make dens and all of the excess flour we bought to make playdough!



Music at Westdene

The restrictions on singing have been particularly difficult to navigate but our passionate Music Lead Emma Bright has been extremely solution focused throughout this challenging period.

Emma writes: "We have a thriving musical culture at Westdene. All children are encouraged to learn an instrument & participate in one of our eight different music ensembles ranging from Junior Choir for our very youngest children through to Samba Band & Song Writers club. We aim to offer a diverse range of ensembles to encourage children to explore & experience a wide of opportunities during their time with us."

Emma organises music curriculum enrichment workshops for each year group during the year. These are linked to specific year group units in our music curriculum & give the children opportunities to sample workshops such as Egyptian Drum & Dance, Japanese Taiko Drumming,



Indonesian Gamelan & even a spoon playing workshop! We also have very strong links with The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Glyndebourne & Brighton Early Music Festival (BREMFB) & have participated in a number of singing & orchestral projects organised & funded by these organisations.

Overcoming the Musical Challenges: BBC Singers

From March 2020 we had to find a very different way of working to try and continue giving the children these terrific experiences – it was an enormous challenge! Our first workshop during lockdown was in May 2020 with a member of the BBC Singers. Our keyworker children participated & hugely enjoyed the very different experience of interacting with a workshop leader remotely via zoom



Emma continues: *“With the start of the new academic year 2020-21, thoughts turned to Christmas & it soon became very clear that our usual sixteen concerts & five carol singing outings weren’t going to be possible. We decided to present “Virtual Christmas Concerts” for each key stage, which involved each class learning a Christmas song. Children had to learn their songs independently at home with tracks posted on their learning platforms & lots of parental support. We then filmed each class performing in our outdoor amphitheatre and uploaded the “concerts” to our website where they could be enjoyed by family and friends.”*



One year 3 child who really dislikes going on the stage found filming outside, without an audience, took away their performance anxiety and commented: *“Can we do our concerts like this every year?”*

Emma also worked in partnership The Grand Hotel in Brighton, one of our regular venues for carol singing, to offer something remotely. Our music co-ordinator created a “pop-up choir” & filmed the children singing some Christmas songs which the Grand Hotel used in their Christmas promotional video. You can view the results here: <https://www.facebook.com/TheGrandHotelBrighton/videos/grand-christmas-lights-2020/385633866008061/>

Emma also sent a selection of our Virtual Concerts to the Care Homes we would normally have visited to carol sing, enabling care home staff to share video footage with their residents.

Festival of Arts – Summer 2021

In June 2020, we had a whole School Festival of Arts day inspired by the collaborative call of teaching unions to 'fight Covid misery' through this creative collective action.

(<https://www.tes.com/news/teachers-fight-covid-misery-national-arts-festival-schools>)



Our Arts Team inspired all the staff to plan a packed programme that ensured that every child experienced at least three different art forms during a creatively driven day. It was wonderful to give the whole timetable over to art, dance, drama, music and digital media.

Marcus Bowery, Year 1 team writes:

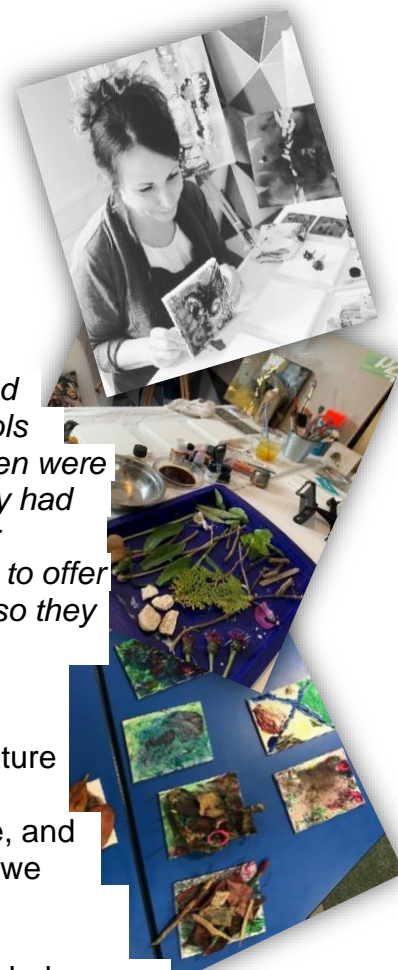
"As part of our Festival of Arts day, we were lucky to build on a relationship with local mixed media artist Charlotte Esposito. We had already discussed a theme - The Wonder of Nature - and wanted to give the children an immersive experience while creating something, which also allowed them to be part of the process each step of the way. To that end, we supported the children in sourcing their own natural resources - grasses, mud, berries - and turning these into their own natural paints to be used as part of their artwork. Charlotte demonstrated a range of techniques via video link using different and usual tools such as a bashed twig, a grass brush or dripping, and the children were encouraged first to experiment with techniques. Then, when they had selected their materials and process, began to put together their nature-inspired mini canvases. Charlotte was on hand remotely to offer her suggestions and to give feedback as the children took part, so they felt supported along the way."

Their final pieces (there are over 90 in total!) will be displayed at school and really capture each child's individual take on what nature means to them, particularly following the hardships of lockdown. This was such a positive experience for children and adults alike, and has begun a relationship with the local artistic community which we wish to build on.

Our



dance specialist teacher provided a whole range of video lessons on how to teach lots of styles including 'disco funk, street dance and jive'. For their music contributions children participated in a wide variety of activities ranging from a DJ workshop, creating live



soundtracks to accompany a silent movie clip, composing pieces to describe the Rain Forest & recording, manipulating & arranging sound using our iPads. Our Year 3 pupils even put on their own Brazilian Carnival complete with masks and a troupe of live professional musicians to accompany their parade.

Emily Lipscombe, our drama lead writes: *“During our Festival of Arts Day, children had the opportunity to play a variety of drama games, using skills like improvisation and mime. The children relish and thrive during these opportunities, showing courage and determination. Drama gives the children a chance to explore and demonstrate their skills and knowledge in different ways.”*



Summer Production of Pandora’s Box

With an extension of Covid restrictions until July 19th, we adjusted our plans for live performances of our Year 6 end of year show by filming the children acting & singing & uploading the footage to Google Classroom. This enabled all year 6 families to share in one of the very important & precious moments of their child leaving primary school. With so many people in self-isolation in the late summer of 2021, this proved to be a positive way to reach as wide an audience as possible. It was so important to go ahead with the shows as one child who loves music stated: *“My reason for getting up in the morning is to go to school & sing my year 6 show songs”*

At Westdene we use drama as an invaluable tool across the whole curriculum throughout the school year. Whether it be bringing a historical figure to life with hot seating, or using a conscience alley during literacy to explore a character's inner-most thoughts, we harness the power of these drama activities to bring lessons to life, as well as developing our speaking, listening, empathy and teamwork skills.

Emily Lipscombe adds: *“We value drama as a subject in its own right, using opportunities like class assemblies and seasonal performances to develop specialist skills like using facial expressions, voice, and characterisation.”*

Working with Professionals: Sabotage Theatre - Puppet Challenge to support Transition

Our Inclusion Lead, Clare Shucksmith writes:

“Sabotage Theatre Company (www.sabotagetheatre.com) came to Westdene Primary School in May 2021 to offer a series of exciting puppet-making workshops

for a group of pupils from Year 6. The workshops used puppet-making and puppetry to help these pupils increase confidence and find ways to express their thoughts around moving between primary and secondary school. They were aimed at pupils who would particularly benefit from the opportunity to address their thoughts and worries in a creative way. Under the watchful eye of professional puppet-maker Zoe Hinks, thirteen children planned, constructed and decorated a rod puppet from recycled materials. Once their colourful characters had come to life, the group were challenged to create a new town where all their creations could live together. In creating complex ideas about their puppets' ideal community and environment, the pupils reflected on place and changes. They constructed a map of a town where all of the puppets' needs could be met. In the final session, they filmed short videos of their puppets, learning some basic puppetry skills along the way. Sabotage Theatre edited their contributions together into a short piece of work for them to share with their peers. You can view the final film here - <https://youtu.be/XR11S0jIhSg>. This was a pilot project for Sabotage Theatre, who hope to raise funding to go into further local schools in future with this impactful project. Westdene Primary have been proud to be the trail-blazers in this exciting Puppet Challenge!"



Outdoor Art Exhibition

Every year we enjoy holding a photographic exhibition for families to enjoy the children's artistic pursuits. This year, we held an open-air art exhibition featuring the poetry, printing, photography and artwork of Year 3. This was a great solution to the



Covid challenge and proved to be a wonderful event enjoyed not just by their families but the whole school community. It is certainly something we want to do again next year.

Our Vision for the Future

A New Art Studio

At Westdene, we pride ourselves on being outward looking, forward thinking and never allowing the grass to grow under our feet.

Caroline Laing, Arts Lead talks here about our next big project; a new Art Studio. *“The transformation of this once foundation stage classroom into a fresh, practical and inspiring art studio, coupled with the expertise of a primary art specialist teacher role, will enable us to provide a rich, relevant and high-quality art curriculum to all children at Westdene. This innovative primary art environment will afford us the ability to provide all of our children with every opportunity to not only learn to draw, paint, print and sculpt across a huge range of media, scales and techniques, but will also give them the freedom to create without fear or angst and to realise that their ideas have relevance, meaning and value. In so doing, we aim for this creative space to have a significant influence to bring out each and every child’s artistic creativity to its full potential so that they can feel inspired and free to develop their ideas and talent beyond the classroom and into their everyday lives for every day of their life.”*

Our Tranquillity Garden

At the same time, we are currently transforming a courtyard area into a ‘tranquillity garden’ which is already being used as a great location for still life and painting nature in its glory.

Music makes a full comeback

Looking forward, our main focus is to re-establish our wide-range of instrumental lessons & music ensembles we offer in school. Our instrumental lessons are delivered by a combination of staff from Brighton & Hove Music & Arts Service & independent teachers, all of whom are fantastically talented & have done a truly amazing job this year delivering most of their lessons online. With our instrumental lessons & ensembles back in place we truly hope we will *finally* be able to give live concerts & performances again, with real people & applause & cheering!!

Strengthening Community Links

Our community links will continue to strengthen & grow through a project organised by our local hospice during the first lockdown called “You Are Not Alone”. This project paired schools with care homes, we recorded songs for residents of our allocated care home during the first lockdown & have subsequently sent them pieces of music recorded during class music lessons. We have also been invited to participate in a national project “Together in Music”, which has similar aims. We are

keen to re-establish a close partnership with Brighton Early Music Festival (BREMFF). We will also re-introduce our curriculum enrichment workshops for each year group ensuring every child has the opportunity to experience as wide a diversity of music as possible.

Artsmark Award

We plan to renew our Artsmark Award and are confident that the work we have undertaken over the past eighteen months in addition to our plans for the future will put us in a strong position to achieve this. We believe this quality mark is vital in underscore what we stand for at Westdene and it serves to renew our energy and vigour for the arts going forwards so that we always strive to enhance our offer and provision.

In Conclusion

The collaborative nature of this blog demonstrates our team ethos which in itself reflects our school motto of Together Everyone Achieves More. We believe the secret to our success has been strong teamwork, a clear vision and a whole team of Arts Leaders across the school who work in partnership with our pupil Arts Ambassadors to always aim for excellence and to put creativity at the heart of everything we do.

As our Music Lead, Emma Bright, writes: *“Like every school, we have faced many challenges during the last eighteen months and delivering the creative arts remotely is probably one of the hardest things a teacher can be asked to do. But we have learnt that it is possible and it can be done – it’s not quite the same as that performing buzz or audience connection but it is well worth putting in the effort & having a go!”*

It has kept us all excited and connected. It has also meant we are raring to go next year with more ideas and creative projects to engage children, staff and families and to reach out to our community as we inspire and support each other.

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