

A photograph of two young students performing on a stage. The student on the left is a girl with long brown hair, wearing a bright yellow sleeveless dress and light-colored wedge sandals. She is looking towards the right and has her mouth open as if singing or speaking. The student on the right is a boy wearing a black top hat, a pink long-sleeved shirt with a small floral pattern, and grey trousers. He is smiling broadly, showing his teeth, and has his right arm around the girl's shoulder. Both students are wearing small black lapel microphones. The background is dark with some vertical text visible, and the stage floor is dark with some blue and yellow markings.

Creatives in Schools Programme

Case study 2

**Student-led choreography – to
build student confidence and
creative thinking**

Case Information

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Research team

Kellie Spee of Kellie Spee Consulting Limited lead in the development of the case studies. Judy Oakden of Pragmatica Limited held the contract for this project.

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Disclaimer

We developed this report in good faith using the information available to us at the time. We provide it on the basis that the authors of the case study are not liable to any person or organisation for any damage or loss which may occur from acting or not acting with respect to any information or advice within this case study.

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Background

Papamoa College is a composite school offering a holistic curriculum from Year 7 to Year 13 students. Each year, as part of the school's programme, the College puts on separate junior and secondary school productions. In 2020, Year 7 and 8 students auditioned for the junior production, *High School Musical*. Seventy-five students auditioned, many with no previous experience of being on stage, acting, singing, or dancing. Each student received a role in the production. It was the vision of the performing arts department that the entire production would be student led, including the dance choreograph. However, the students needed support and the skills to create polished performances. Creative in Schools was an opportunity to access an experienced and highly qualified stage performer in dance and singing to support the project.

Research method

This case draws on interviews with a member of the senior leadership team, the lead teacher, the creative practitioner Sarah Garner, three parents and four students between August and September 2020. It also incorporates feedback from the joint proposal and the Milestone One report. As well, the evaluator visited the school for one of the sessions the lead teacher held with the whole production cast. At the time of the data collection the project was still underway but benefits from the project were already clear.

The Project

The creative practitioner, the lead teacher and the singing teacher worked with a cast of 40 students. The creative practitioner helped teachers and students learn the basic principles of choreography through creative, individual expression, dance and choreography devices. She also helped students with their singing and stage presence.

Objectives of the project

The overall objectives of the project were to:

- develop students to articulate the physical and verbal communication of the visual art of dance
- encourage flexible, creative thinkers who are to perceive, examine and evaluate different points of view.

The project aimed to help students take abstract ideas, create movements to express themselves in powerful dance works and develop their choreographing. This approach was in keeping with the learning philosophies of Papamoa College – learning through inquiry and students leading their learning.

I suppose here at the College, we like students to drive their learning, and so that choreographing and coming up with their own input into the show could be quite a nice aspect. So that was my thinking right at the beginning. (Lead teacher)

From planning to implementation

Planning began in term 4, 2019, after the launch of the Creative in Schools programme. The lead teacher approached a senior leadership staff member to gather support and outline the Creative in Schools process. Together they discussed how Creative in Schools could work within the school. The College has a focus on building and promoting the dramatic arts in the lower-level school, and Creative in Schools was a perfect avenue to do this. They both agreed that the Creative practitioner would work with the junior production, as the lower middle schools timetabling and student academic requirements were easier to manage. The College was also focused on building and promoting the dramatic arts in the lower-level school, and Creative in Schools was a perfect avenue to do this.

The lead teacher and creative practitioner met through a mutual acquaintance. Although not on the Creative in Schools register, the creative practitioner accepted and completed an application to become listed on the Ministry of Education creative profile register. The creative practitioner's CV is extensive, including experience as a qualified dance teacher and many years of professional theatre and cabaret experience in London. In partnership, the lead teacher and the creative practitioner planned the project's specifics, including the goals, timing of sessions, and workshop content.

The project began in Term One, 2020. The creative practitioner attended the school on Mondays and Wednesdays from 9 am to 12:30 pm. She also ran a three-hour holiday rehearsal session alongside the lead teacher.

The College committed to the project, releasing students from timetabled classes to attend the sessions. Following the sessions, the creative practitioner and lead teacher would debrief and feed-forward to refine future sessions as needed. They would decide the weekly focus, whether it be dance, music, or song.

[Talking] on messenger on Facebook, [the creative [practitioner] she would just drop me like on a Sunday night, 'Hey I'm up to this do you want me to still continue with that particular song to work with the students, or where's the greatest need in the show?... We did have that contact [each] Sunday... And then she came to school on Monday knowing that that was the music that I wanted her to work with for the kids to come up with something, yeah. (Lead teacher)

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the creative practitioner produced an online video of dance moves for the students to practise during the Lockdown. The lead teacher also ran online sessions reading through script lines with students. Students remained enthusiastic, and when school resumed, they resumed their face-to-face sessions.

Outcomes

This next section describes ways the project met the intended outcomes of the Creatives in Schools programme.

Students

The project successfully provided students with an environment to learn and grow while having fun creatively exploring new concepts and ideas. Together the students created a positive, supportive, family-like space where new friendships blossomed. Students' self-confidence grew as they learnt to express their thoughts and feelings through dance.

[Without the project] I would be, I would still be the one shy kid in the class, and yeah, I wouldn't have said what I have said today because I'd be way different, more shy. (Student)

[Without the project] I wouldn't know where I belong... I didn't know where I belonged. Yeah, I wouldn't have the same friends I have today. (Student)

Students identified several positive changes they saw in themselves. At the beginning of the sessions with the creative practitioner, the level of commitment required was challenging. This included time out of other classrooms. However, students learnt how to plan, organise their time better, and balance production and school responsibilities. As described by the students, possibly one of the project's greatest successes was the sense of belonging and self-value they created.

If you talked to me in Year 7 after like this whole journey, oh my gosh, I wouldn't even be sitting here right now. I'd be so shy off in the corner. Like 'I don't want to talk to anyone.' I was that shy kid, very shy kid. But I feel like as I've gone through the journey and gone through like confidence-building with performing arts. It's definitely helped me a lot, and I'm here now talking to you guys. (Student)

It's really helped because when I was at the start of the year, I was the one kid who just never socialised, never did anything with a team, and I really struggled, but [the creative practitioner] helped me realise that you can't do everything alone. And that's kind of built my confidence to socialise and perform in front of others. (Student)



For Year 7 students, the production supported the transition from primary to intermediate and gave the students a tangible focus.

When I was in primary, I never used to fit in. I was from one group to another to another, and now that I'm in the production, I feel like I'm almost friends with everyone in it. I feel like I fit in now. (Student)

Parents noticed the positive changes in their children and felt that the production had helped them find a sense of belonging in the school.

We have seen a massive change in [him]... [He] comes across quite confident although he's actually quite shy, and he used to be a child who had one or two really close friends and those are the friends that he stuck with. But with this opportunity now, he met a lot of other children across the other learning commons, and his circle of friends just got a lot wider. And he is actually blooming and thriving from our point of view from that production, yeah. It's unbelievable. (Parent)

Students explored ideas through dance and choreography, and in small groups they devised sections of free movement, dance and partner work. Students discussed and designed the spacing and angle needed and choreographed four dances for the show.

I came up with some ideas and some sort of framework and then got them to have some input... I would say, 'In this section, I want you to dance basketball', and they [would] have to come up with something within their group. (Creative practitioner)



For many students, this was their first experience of performing arts. Students' sense of achievement was affirming. Students learned how to take risks and test themselves in a safe space. Through collaborative social interaction, they experienced success in areas that they had not previously imagined possible.

When I first joined, I never danced, and I didn't sing or anything. And throughout Term 1 and 2, she's really built up my confidence and helped me improve my dances and signing. And it's been really cool because, without her, I wouldn't be the person I am today. (Student)

I haven't tried singing [before] either, so the production was basically a big gamble for me, but she's helped make it easy, you know. Made it feel where I belong, yeah.

Like normally, I'd be shaking when I get up on stage. But now I can sing confidently like I almost believe in myself. And she's helped me with that just with the points, and now I can hear myself. I still don't, I don't think anyone sounds, hears them self [as] good, but if I listen to it enough now I can hear myself, and I sound okay.

When we got our script book first, I was freaking out, just I saw it, and I was like in my head, 'No way'. I thought, 'There's no way I'm remembering all these lines.' Miss Garner [the creative practitioner]'s helped us right through that, and she's almost drilled it into us, so we pretty much know it now. (Student)

Students loved being involved in a production: experiencing the camaraderie between cast members and contributing to the show's greater common goal. As they consider moving into Year 9 through to Year 13, they say they are keen to continue taking drama or music, and to be part of future productions. One student has applied for the Year 9 performance art pathway class, a new initiative in Papamoa College.

I've definitely chosen drama and performing arts as my NCEA, so yeah, I've chosen that. I'm really into creative stuff like art, performing arts, singing, drama, all of that like stuff, so I definitely chose that. (Student)

Further, the senior students who perform in senior productions inspire the Year 7 and 8 students who now see value in involving themselves in the arts while at school. One student was confident they want a career in performing arts.

I looked up to [an older student] when I was in Year 7, and I was like I want to be like her. I want to perform like her, and she helps us sometimes with like our production, so yeah, a bit of a role model there. (Student)

I would love to get a job with music and drama. Because I love it so much. (Student)

Creative practitioner

Although an experienced dance teacher and professional performer, the creative practitioner noticed the new ways she developed and enhanced her own skills by taking part in Creatives in Schools. As a private dance teacher, she mostly teaches classical ballet within a dance school to those with existing technical dance knowledge. By contrast, at Papamoa College she worked with a group of 40 children who mostly had no technical dance knowledge. She had to adapt and come up with new ways to engage and teach the students, particularly the boys.

She found this need to adapt her style of teaching dance to resonate with less experienced students was useful. She liked finding ways that engaged these students. It also reminded her of the importance of the foundations of dance.

Professionally it's been good for my brain because, with my [private dance students], I can give [instructions] to them, and they can remember [them]... But with these [students]... it was kind of like a 'take it back to basics' course for myself... Sometimes saying it out loud when you go away and then deal with younger kids, it kind of ratifies what you have been doing. (Creative practitioner)

The creative practitioner was glad to offer many students a new experience. She observed, "Some kids are very lucky, [but] not everybody can have that access." She was fulfilled seeing many of the students happy and proudly performing on stage, singing and dancing. While not all of the students would continue into the arts, having the ability to stand firm and confidently deliver a speech or lines on stage was an important achievement she felt.

She also saw students learn what it means to self-manage – turning up on time, not letting other people down and being part of a team that supports each other through tough times.

And even just learning some of those really basic lessons. 'I have to go, or I am going to let everybody else down.' Or, 'I am not going to go to the canteen at lunchtime and hang out around the back, I am going to go to dance rehearsal because I said that I would be there.' (Creative practitioner)

The creative practitioner enjoyed having the chance to work in her local Papamoa School community and form a connection through dance notices, social media and performances. Outside of the project, she also spent a small amount of time with the senior production supporting them with their singing.



Teachers and kaiako

The lead teacher worked alongside the creative practitioner and students, gaining a deeper understanding of choreography and performance. Although the lead teacher supported students to act, she was aware of her limited dance skills. The teacher valued the chance to bring in an expert and to learn new ways of engaging with students in dance and performance.

[Creative in Schools] brings in expertise that we might not necessarily have. I mean, teachers are very flexible and adaptable, and we'll throw ourselves into anything and give it a go. But to actually have someone whose got that talent and expertise to come in and do things with the kids that we hadn't even thought of – that's where it's so good. (Lead teacher)

Generally, the project supported the philosophy of Papamoa College, which encourages students to take part in the realms of sport, arts and culture, "to become global citizens who leave the College being good people and capable contributors to society". The project also aligned with the College's direction in the arts, specifically the new 2021 Year 9 performing arts pathway. A senior management member reflected that a possible extension of the project would be to involve creative practitioners as coaches and mentors across multiple classroom settings to "enrich the holistic experience" for the students. This kind of extension would also help to embed learnings from an extra-curricula area to an integrated curriculum.

Parents and whānau

Parents supported their child's involvement in the production, allowing them be released from other classroom learning to attend rehearsals on a weekly basis. Although not actively involved throughout, parents looked forward to watching their children perform as part of the productions over five nights. A number of parents also contributed to the show performances. One father was the official photographer, while another parent, who was a hairdresser, did all the performers hair. Parents felt positively towards the school and, in some instances, were thankful that this new opportunity was available to their children.

I know that drama class and belonging to this group made him belong more to the school because he feels so safe and so happy with that group and being a part of that. (Parent)

When he came to intermediate last year, he was a bit... I won't say lost, but it took him some time to adjust to the new system, the different routines and the different subjects. You know, he had to look after everything for himself. So, it took him a bit to get his way around, but he managed it. And with this drama group now, this just gave him an immense boost. (Parent)

Parents could see their children maturing and learning transferable skills such as commitment, working hard and self-management.

We spoke to [him], and we said that we hope that it doesn't change, "That you are not going to slide down, like in maths or whatever." And he didn't, and it's great. And what he gained on the other side, I think, is worth a lot as well and probably as much as maths or English; I see it equally. (Parent)

Parents watched their children work extra hours, and spend lunchtimes and school holidays rehearsing. As the performance draws closer, parents see the arts as a worthwhile pathway while their children remain in school. They are sure that the increase in confidence and self-belief gained through participating in music, dance and performing positively impacts their children's motivation and contributes positively to other areas of learning.

It's another level of learning, and like I said, in my opinion, it's as important as the other subjects as well. You just grow in a different area – which I believe positively influence[s] their learning in the other subjects as well... When you gain more confidence, and you feel better about yourself and stuff... then that reflects definitely on your learning. (Parent)

Conclusions

The “Student-led choreography” project has supported students to grow in confidence, become critical thinkers, develop a sense of belonging and build a friend group in their junior years at Papamoa College. Learning and discovery were the fundamental principles that supported outcomes for students, the creative, the school and the parents.



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