

St Helena's CE Primary School Musical Express' "Circus Tales"

1. Striving for Excellence

A hundred and twelve children, from four of our six Partnership schools, sang, danced and acted in front of a packed audience on the huge stage of our local Skegness Embassy Theatre. They took their bows and grinned from ear to ear as their families stood to applaud their wonderful efforts in "Circus Tales". Regular, intensive school rehearsals, over a period of 6 weeks, ensured the young performers pulled off a musical show of the highest standard.

2. Emphasising authenticity

The children's talents were unlocked by working with the Embassy's talented musician and choreographer, Amanda Rivers. Her artistry, expert musical knowledge and creative flair enabled our young learners to produce an original, collaborative piece of theatre. They loved her and marvelled at working on the "real" stage with lighting, dry ice, microphones and "wings"; even waiting in their dressing rooms with mirrors and lights was exciting!

3. Inspiring and Engaging

It was the power and inspiration of working with an expert that led the children to be so proud of their efforts. This was summarised by a little Y3 boy, Logan, who said, "I want to sing and dance for the rest of my life. It was magical."

The whole learning process increased children's confidence raised aspirations, inspired perseverance and improved communication skills. But it wasn't just the children who felt inspired; all the teachers who worked alongside Amanda became totally enraptured by the project. Staff will build upon the learning and the expertise of the children hereafter. A little two year old sister was even overheard saying she couldn't wait to come to school and be on the stage!

4. Ensuring a positive child-centred experience

The words, routines, songs and storyline were all carefully matched to the age of the children; directorial choices were made by them and in negotiation with them, giving rise to the inclusion of their kind of humour and entertainment! As each school shared their Circus tale, the others sat, at times, spellbound, in awe and wonder and then in fits of giggles.

5. Actively involving children

At the start of the process, each group of children, back in their own schools, decided on the aspect of the circus they would like to portray in movement and song. Their improvised sketches gave rise to a storyline and script, created by and for them. Throughout the rehearsals, the oldest children were relied upon to support and teach the youngest children, taking on the role of lead learners to reinforce the importance of constant practice. No child was ever seen sat down; everyone was included and active all the time!

6. Providing a sense of personal progression

Many of the children had never taken part in a musical before; they had never sung with a pianist or danced with a choreographer. This was new and exciting, different from the traditional School Christmas Nativity or end of term play! The children's increased confidence and improved self-esteem was exemplified in the slick, polished performance. A number of the children have since joined the theatre's own academy to continue performing with Amanda.

7. Developing a sense of ownership and belonging

At the pen-ultimate rehearsal, the children received their brightly coloured T-shirts with the eye-catching "Circus Tales" logo flashed across. The moment they tried them on, a sense of unity prevailed and they suddenly realised that an actor belongs to a group and depends upon others to create a perfect piece. That sense of belonging and mutual trust linked the groups of children across the schools and when they sang and danced together for the first and only time, they performed as one big family and loved it!

What have we learned for next time?

- *Find an inspirational Arts expert, who loves their subject and children*
- *Use the children's ideas to create the piece in a workshop before the 6 week rehearsal period*
- *Have a mid-point rehearsal at the Arts venue to help the children visualise the performance space*
- *Spend the performance day at the theatre scheduling individual school's rehearsals and then work together on the opening number and finale*
- *Find the finances (£600/school) by hook or by crook because the value to the children is immeasurable.*