

An inspiring story...

Debbie Richards, ASD Coordinator at Paddock Primary School, one of the participating schools on the RADiate Project

The children at Paddock School all have moderate or severe learning difficulties and accompanying complex needs or autism. We have been very lucky to have been involved in the Royal Academy Dance's RADiate Project for the past three years. Every week we have one whole day of specialist teaching – this has allowed all children across the school to be involved. This has been an exceptional opportunity as, although all teachers at the school are specialists in working with children with special needs, no one has expertise in teaching dance, and it has been wonderful to be part of such well-planned inclusive sessions.

Children with severe learning difficulties can make very small steps of progress, so having an on-going link with the RADiate Project has been invaluable. Children are able to make gradual progress within the structure and routine of the dance session, and seeing the level of engagement and interaction increase as the weeks progressed has been fantastic!

I have been particularly impressed with the progress of one boy with autism, 'K'. When the RADiate project initially began at Paddock School, he required a high level of support to follow the routine of the session, imitate movements and engage. He found it difficult to initiate in these sessions and was reliant on prompting from the dance tutor and school staff. As the project has been on-going, he has had more opportunities to take part in sessions and his confidence has gradually developed. His ability to work independently in the dance sessions has increased enormously and he is now able to take a leading role in the sessions and guide his peers through a series of movements. He is also much better able to initiate, e.g. choose his own movements, and make decisions, which are very important skills for somebody with autism to develop.

The Lead Tutor for the RADiate Project suggested that we could begin a link with a mainstream school, Granard School, who also have regular radiate dance sessions. These sessions were carefully planned by the dance tutor to include sections that the students at Paddock were familiar with, so that they were not daunted in a new environment. The sessions were a great success as they provided 'K', and another Paddock student, with the opportunity to learn from their mainstream peers. This is not an opportunity we can easily generate in a special school setting and I felt incredibly proud watching the Paddock School students joining in the sessions and looking to the Granard students to know what to do next. Their confidence in visiting Granard and taking part in the dance sessions increased each time we visited and the familiar structure of the sessions meant that 'K' was also able to take his turn and lead the Granard students in sections of the session. He was very excited and proud on his return to school telling his classmates that it was "great" and "fantastic".