
Tordoir, J. (2017) 'Quest for Inclusion: a Story of Active Participation', in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 3, published by the Learning for Well-being Foundation.

Quest for Inclusion: a Story of Active Participation

By Jacqueline Tordoir

Challenge

Last year, our daughter Daniela (14) went to the International School of Brussels (ISB). The mission of the school was: 'everyone included, challenged and successful.' Of the three mission components, 'challenge' is the one Daniela has been covering since she was 3, when she was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Although her one-year intensive hospital treatment is now a distant memory, Daniela's learning difficulties continue to be a daily challenge. Naturally her challenge is shared by all those who surround her, Mum and Dad, sister and brother, friends and family, teachers and peers. We are all on Daniela's boat, navigating with her through the choppy waters of her education journey. Together seeking her well-being as her destination, we work in the hope that each twist and turn will empower her to increasingly take the helm of her own life.

Inclusion?

Daniela has an atypical profile with many strong social skills and some very pronounced specific literacy and numeracy challenges arising from her medical treatment as a young child. At ISB, Daniela was enrolled as a pupil in the ISB's 'Special Education' section, where she spent most of her school hours in a small class of 6 children all of whom had significant learning challenges. Daniela (who is Dutch and Irish) can only participate in lessons in the mainstream Middle School in Dutch and Drama. While relishing her periods in the mainstream, Daniela found it hard to have the label 'special education kid' attached to her and often wondered why she could not, just like her peers be a full-time mainstream student without any such label. The gap between the education levels at both sections was large, with Daniela hovering somewhere in between, intellectually, emotionally and socially. It was tough. Our quest as parents was to see where 'inclusion' and 'success' could become a reality for her at this school.

Most Success!

As in every journey, sometimes the most rewarding moments happen unexpectedly beyond the planned itinerary. Our experience of a school play brought such an unexpected moment of enlightenment: As spectators of the school's *Jungle Book* production, we witnessed 'inclusion, challenge and success' performed by Daniela impersonating 'Wolf 3' in the play. Pacing up and down on the stage, with the purpose and quiet determination of a wolf confident in her fur, she howled and scowled and showed herself as an established part of the pack. For the first time: she looked and felt like she belonged: The quality of her focus and participation surpassed all our expectations and were unmatched by any of her previous stage acts. What led to this success? To find out more, I decided to speak to Carl Robinson, the school's drama teacher and the *Jungle Book's* Theatre Director, although preferring to be referred to as the production's 'facilitator.'



Building trust

Conscious that inclusion is a key component to Daniela's learning, I set out by investigating this aspect first when I interviewed Carl. When rehearsals started I had noticed that it took Daniela a while to get into it. She showed no particular enthusiasm for attending rehearsals. Carl confirmed that at the start she had been withdrawn and frightened to make her voice heard. She would cower in a corner rather than step forward, whisper rather than speak up or shout out. He recognised her challenge: She was the only special education student in the group and by far the youngest. However, Carl's experience is that very few children will

feel entirely confident at the beginning of rehearsals for a play. Nearly every child suffers from a lack of confidence in one way or another.

As self-confidence is very closely linked to trust, Carl starts off any theatre production by building trust in the group. He works on trust by tapping into a large repository of exercises. He aims to make everyone feel part of the whole, to get everyone to feel that they have something unique to contribute to the group and that difference is not just OK, but something to be cherished. Through trust-building exercises, children eventually end up trusting themselves and each other. In Carl's approach, trust does not stand alone, building group cohesion and engagement form an integral part of trust.

Trust games

One classic example, also often known to be used in team building is 'trust falls.' A person stands behind you and you say 'I'm falling' and you lean back and they catch you. Carl: 'There is a good reason for those kinds of activities being so successful in business, team building and drama, because we equate trust in other people with physical trust. That maternal feeling that somebody is going to hold you and carry you. I think establishing trust through physical contact can be a really powerful way of engaging students. If you know someone can catch you, then you're likely to trust that they support you in an idea as well.'

Linking trust to building group cohesion and engaged participation by every member of the cast, Carl draws his inspiration from Augusto Boal,¹ the Brazilian founder of the 'Theatre of the Oppressed.' Carl: 'I like Boal's exercises as they are built on building communities, building a sense of trust in a team and the people around you. In his 'Space Walk' exercise, one person is in the middle of a group that forms a really tight circle around him/her. If that person lifts their arm, then the group fills the space created between that person's arm and their body with their bodies; with their hands, with their shoulders, with their backs. If that person sits down, then a seat is formed beneath him, if he lifts his foot then that is supported. All the way through, in whatever way the person is moving, he is supported, not just by a single individual but by an entire group. It takes courage to be the one that has to trust other people. The game creates huge excitement, fun and play and is a very powerful exercise expressing community support for an individual. I do lots of activities like that to make people feel part of the group, which is often why people turn to drama. Some might find it hard to be part of other communities, but you can form tight communities in drama.'

Building Engagement, role modelling success and failure

After building trust and creating a strong sense of community, both in his theatre productions and in drama-lessons, how does Carl manage to get everyone of his students to stay engaged? Carl: 'The root of engagement in my classroom comes from the student-teacher relationship, the lack of a hierarchy. I come from a background in theatre where collaboration was at the forefront of making art, not the Director-Actor relationship. I

¹ Games For Actors and Non-Actors (London: Routledge, 1992; Second Edition 2002).

brought that experience into my teaching and ever since I started teaching, that's always been my focus; to try and establish a working and a learning environment where the students are as much as possible on the same level as me; on the same level of contribution. Now of course I have a large hand in choosing the activities, the acting modules and guiding the course, but when it comes to running those activities and to participating in all those activities, I have an equal share. When we play improvisation games for example, I would go up as many times as everybody else in the room. The effect on the children is that I show that I am also capable of success and failure. It shows that I am willing to try an activity at which I might not be the best person in the room. Students might have better ideas in that situation or their ideas might simply work better than mine do. Take improvisation games where the purpose is laughter; it is often a good gauge that I might not get as many laughs as one of the students. And it shows that it is OK to fail, it is OK to try things out, to experiment and not always get it right. That philosophy has always driven me as a teacher. So that's one aspect of engagement.'

Building engagement, being brave

Reflecting this back to students' participation Carl said: 'At the start of my courses I talk about the difference between confidence and bravery. Confidence is the attitude, "Yes I can do this no problem!" Bravery is: "I am not sure I can do this, but I'll try". Students that seem to be the most confident in the room are not necessarily the most confident, they are just the bravest at that moment; they are just taking that chance. So we do an activity and 50 % of the students get up and give it a go and the other 50 don't, let's say. Then we reflect and some of the students that gave it a go, might say: "well I was nervous before I went on stage, but once I was on stage my nerves started to go away". Accepting that nerves are OK in front of your group is important and having nerves is fine, it is not that everyone is confident all the time, we all have nerves. The other 50% then see that it is OK, they survived, the others were successful and even if it was not funny or exactly what they expected, they were no worse off for it. The engagement increases as students will follow the example of others giving it a go. As you build the confidence in the students to experiment, to fail and to try, they are more likely to try more things out and will stay engaged.'

Carl then explained that he finds activities that are about getting to know a person or getting to know other sides to them also quite effective for engagement. Carl: 'One such activity is to put people in pairs with each person standing on opposite sides of the room and the aim is to get the other person closer to you. The way you get the other person to move is by making guessing statements about that person. If the fact is correct, the person takes a step closer, if it's not correct, they don't move. Some are obvious facts such as "you're a woman," others are guesses such as: "you like going to concerts." Gradually you're trying to guess things that make the other person move closer towards you.' In this game, Carl encourages his students to find out unusual things about the other person. A variant is to say true statements about yourself and when it is true for the other person, they move closer towards you. Again unusual or personal statements such as 'I love my Grandad' or 'I get upset when I think about homeless people' are encouraged. After, there is usually a reflection on the whole exercise. Why did people move or not move at

different stages? What can they add about their personalities in the context of true or false statements made? The purpose is to explore what things they have in common and where they differ. Carl: 'Students establish an understanding of each other and that's so important in drama because to know a person's interest, his passions, what they're good at, can help you collaborate with them, or draw the best out of them.'

(see also Carl's Blog: <http://workingperformance.blogspot.be/>).

Creating safe environments for risk-taking

After trust and engagement building, Carl's next step is usually to create a safe environment in which children are encouraged to take risks and to reflect openly on each other's performances through giving critical, non-judgmental feedback. Children thrive by sensing that none of the feedback given is ever personal, that each comment serves the purpose of increasing their skills and the quality of the group effort as a whole. Risk-taking is cultivated by giving children exercises to stretch their imagination, asking them to perform the impossible. Everyone takes part no matter how hesitant they feel about taking risks. The secret is in the approach. How can you not take a risk when you are asked to work out a way to turn yourself inside out, or to find a way of seeing the back of your own head? Carl avoids large group work at the beginning. Encouraging small groups, small interactions where there is much less 'perceived' risk for the participants. Carl: 'Group work can be really scary, getting on a stage can be really scary, so performing anywhere but on the stage initially helps. Initially getting students to work in pairs, getting the pairs to share with another pair and build up slowly to 4, group work and performing in a small group in front of a big audience is how I get around stage-fright.'

Making art through collaboration

Carl's vision on theatre is one where everyone actively participates in building it. For his productions, Carl sees his role as a facilitator rather than a director. He uses the creative input he gets from the children to build the play. There might be a script, but it is flexible. Carl: 'Children have excellent ideas; I would be mad not to take them on. The process is more important than the end-result.' All the children in *Jungle Book* were active agents in building it, they were treated as competent partners in shaping the process and the end-product.

For Carl, collaboratively devised performances make for an egalitarian process in the way people participate in the group, valuing each and everyone's idea. Inspired by Roland Barthes's essay 'The death of the Author',² Carl sees the actors as having an equal share in

² 'The Death of the Author' (French: *La mort de l'auteur*) is a 1967 essay by the French literary critic and theorist Roland Barthes. Barthes' essay argues against traditional literary criticism's practice of incorporating the intentions and biographical context of an author in an interpretation of a text, and instead argues that writing and creator are unrelated.

the making of theatre and in some cases even the audience. This approach encourages diverse perspectives and celebrates difference. But strategies are needed to bring different perspectives together. Carl: 'When making a piece of theatre, I don't start with the idea for the final piece the final story, because when you are working collaboratively it is very difficult to agree on what is the right starting point. This is why I start with taking everybody's ideas, allowing everyone to respond in different ways and instead of discounting anybody's idea as false, I build on children's ideas. We swap ideas. So maybe we start with a photograph of a calm sea; someone responds to that calm sea with a song, a gentle soulful melody and then I might respond to that with a poem. Then we swap, and both do something with each other's work, the ideas from the other person become the new stimulus, and you create maybe another song or poem, or add more verses, create a dance, add lyrics. Then you swap again. We gradually build up the ideas independently and then at some point we try to combine my poem to which someone else had added some verses to the music and the dance and we bring everything together. Now we have a performance that is a combination of everyone's ideas interwoven together, which is richer, more complicated and more stimulating than if we had simply decided to follow a script about some people lost at sea. This form of theatre is about encouraging diversity and creativity.'

'Scripted theatre gives opportunities too but tends to be more skills-based. In the *Jungle Book*, because of my relationship with the students and the way that I approach working with the script, I was always asking for feedback from the audience (the children that were not on stage at any particular time), instead of me just giving notes to the cast. The children were encouraged to self-direct their scenes. You allow students to inquire and discover. Students then feel engaged as they have a stake in the making of it. '

The world's a stage, how about our schools?

So where was Daniela in all this? Her initial apprehension had been noticed by Carl, so he involved her, just like all the others in the trust-building exercises. When these did not have an immediate effect, or at least not as much as was required to make Daniela an active participant in the process, Carl intervened. A small push did the trick. He took Daniela aside and told her that she needed to be brave. That without her taking action herself there would be no reaction. That she should give the others the opportunity to learn from her, from her energy, from her physicality and that they in turn could help her with remembering her lines and 'prompt' whenever it was needed. Messages for trust and risk-taking with a safety net supplied, it worked. Buoyed up by the feedback she received when acting out an angry wolf, Daniela continued to develop her role from strength to strength. No prompting was needed at any stage during the performance, Wolf 3 had become Daniela's own creation....

Little did we know, that when we signed our daughter up for *Jungle Book*, she would be benefiting from an approach that covered trust building, active engagement, community building, risk-taking strategies and collaborative theatre making. She learned and acquired a large range of transversal skills essential to building independence. Its effect on Daniela

raises the question why theatre or at least theatre-making practices do not form a larger part of school curricula.



If it's true that 'all the world's a stage',³ Carl found a way of bringing the stage into Daniela's world and answered our quest for inclusion, challenge and success. More schools should follow the act.

Author

Jacqueline Tordoir is the mother of Daniela and project coordinator for the Learning for Well Being Foundation⁴ (formerly Universal Education Foundation). Jacqueline has an MA in English from Leiden University and University College Dublin. She started her career as a teacher and taught at secondary and primary levels in The Netherlands, the UK and in Belgium. After, she specialised in project coordination at European level in NGO's and at the European Commission. Her passion in life is finding ways to foster inclusive education and to create real chances for children who are disadvantaged by their socio-economic circumstances or through having special learning needs.

³ William Shakespeare – *As You Like It*

⁴ <http://l4wb.org/#/en/home>