

# Akādemi

phf Paul Hamlyn  
Foundation



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

# REACH OUT AND REVEAL PROJECT REPORT

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Photo credit: Vipul Sangoi

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## 1. What is Reach Out and Reveal?

Funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Reach Out and Reveal is a new 'test and explore' project looking at how classical Indian dance vocabulary might support the physical and communication needs of children with Autistic Spectrum Conditions. Akademi has worked with two partner schools serving students with moderate-severe processing and learning barriers and delivered thirty weekly sessions over three terms to an older and younger class of students. Crucially, the goal has not been to teach technical steps, nor an exercise class, but to enable new discoveries of physicality, presence and awareness of body and physical release. This project explores how clearly-attuned dance activity can trigger and strengthen movement responses and communication amongst children and young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

While a few dance institutions have begun to offer initiatives with autistic young people in mind, this project has revealed the huge potential of creative-classical Indian dance forms to appropriately address the very complex and highly individualistic needs of profoundly autistic young people. The fundamental grounding of Indian classical dance forms in storytelling and human experience offers children and young people a path to movement, which is unencumbered by difficulties with verbal communication, delays processing instructions and a lack of motivation to engage in physical activity. The young people have been able to participate in challenging physical tasks, create independent movements and interact with each other to a degree that has surprised the staff at Papillon House School. This success has been down to firstly the dance artists themselves whose comfort with being theatrical, childlike and emotionally versatile has enabled them to elicit high levels of trust from the young people and secondly the flexibility of the art forms, which offer a vast variety of movement possibilities that are unrestricted by technical rules and musical genre. This report looks at the work of the two dance artists at Papillon House School (PH) to understand the context in which this project has been delivered, the challenges that young people with autism spectrum disorder face and the value of specifically bringing creative-classical Indian dance to these students. This report is based on seminars with Akademi and the artists, observations of the sessions and interviews with the dance artists and PH staff. It is produced alongside resource packs, example lesson plans and children

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case studies, with the intention to collate and share information for the benefit of both the South Asian and wider dance sector.

## **2. What is the context of this project?**

### **2.1 What are the challenges that the young people face at Papillon House?**

Autism is a developmental disability and has been referred to in this report with the more inclusive term 'autism spectrum disorder' (ASD). As outlined by the National Autistic Society, the three main areas of difficulty that that young people on the autism spectrum share are:

- (1) Difficulty with social communication: a difficulty with verbal and non-verbal communication that includes the use of language, voice, facial expression, gesture and also jokes, sarcasm, idioms and conversational norms.
- (2) Difficulty with social interaction: difficulty understanding the emotions of others and expressing their own feelings; a tendency to spend more time alone and seek comfort in unexpected ways.
- (3) Difficulty with social imagination: difficulty in interpreting actions and events; in predicting change and coping with unfamiliar situations.

The young people at Papillon House are aged 5-19 years old. They are profoundly autistic and have a range of conditions associated with autism such as echolalia, sensory processing delay, oppositional defiance disorder and pathological demand avoidance. This results in a myriad of complex needs within the classroom at Papillon House. The young people often have strong likes and dislikes that stem from the intensified sensory sensitivity and the highly focused interests that autism can bring about. The young people also have vastly different communication abilities and strategies; within the same class there are young people that are completely non-verbal and those whom have little to no difficulty with verbal communication. Specific disorders can mean that some young people must not be pressured into participating in an activity, that some young people must not be given too many verbal instructions, that some young people should not be given tactile or visual or auditory information. Given the highly individualistic needs of the young people at Papillon House, it is a challenge to create shared experiences that are comfortable for everybody.

### **2.2 Why was Reach Out And Reveal conceived?**

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The staff at Papillon House have been very enthusiastic about introducing the Reach Out And Reveal project to their students. While the school has a wide curriculum that encompasses academic, wellbeing and creative needs, the school has never benefited from interaction with performance artists and the staff were keen to emphasise that the students at PH do not have opportunities to engage in cultural activities. One teacher explained that, “the national curriculum is not meaningful for all the children; for some it really is but for others you have to find something else to embed it into, in order for it to be functional.” The combined use of gesture, rhythm, storytelling, music, movement and facial expression inherent in Indian classical dance was particularly appealing and seemed to offer the students a new and relevant route to learning. One class teacher emphasised that while there were a range of art and craft activities at PH, “it is one thing to use your hands, but completely another to use your whole body.”

The staff, artists and project facilitators together discussed how Reach Out And Reveal could benefit the students and how best to design its delivery. The staff highlighted those challenges that were common in the classroom and which the ROaR project should address. These included: a limited repertoire of movement, a lack of fitness and physical strength, hypermobility, a lack of independent action, low self-esteem, low levels of peer interaction, low motivation and a fear of difference.

### **2.3 Who are the artists delivering the project?**

The effectiveness of the ROaR project depends to a very large degree on the artists delivering the weekly sessions; they are the channel through which the children and young people access any of the benefits that the project has to offer and have therefore been carefully selected by Akademi. Anusha Subramanyam and Seema De Jorge-Chopra are full-time professionals working in a variety of dance settings. Both have had technical training in Indian classical dance from a young age, and now practise these forms in a contemporary British context specialising in performance, health and research environments.

The dance forms underpinning their practice are Bharatanatyam and Kathak, two of the major classical dance styles from India. While both these forms have distinctly different histories, aesthetic codes and technical rules, they share a strong emphasis on gesture, rhythm, storytelling, music, facial expression and emotional presence. Bharatanatyam and

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Kathak are the points of departure for these artists; from training in these forms, Anusha and Seema have developed a flexible and diverse practice that can be shared with diverse communities. Both these artists have experience working in community environments such as hospitals, carer centres and with elderly people.

This broad experience in moulding the classical dance forms into adaptable and accessible practices for the community makes these artists particularly well suited to the ROaR project, which is centered on creative dance sessions, rather than technical dance classes. Through these artists, ROaR offers the uncommon combination of rich classical Indian forms and a creative delivery. This report will refer to this particular form of dance as 'creative-classical Indian Dance'.

## **2.4 What have the sessions involved?**

The creative sessions have prioritised the specific challenges that students at PH face, rather than dance-related objectives. The artists have not been intent on teaching set movements or sequences, nor preparing for any kind of performance. Instead, the artists have aimed to enable the young people "to have relational experiences, to have sensory input, to build strength and to experience performative movement quality."

The sessions began with warm-up activities and eased the students into more sustained movement tasks, before cooling and quietening down with a relaxation session. Warm up activities focused on encouraging an active and conscious use of breath, and familiarising the young people with the new space that they were in. Anusha, the lead artist, was keen to help the students build a physical capacity that would be useful in functional movement. Getting to the floor and back up again easily was a challenge for one of her classes so Anusha built movement tasks that required this up and down motion. Activating the body's muscles to switch between the actions of pushing and pulling was another key learning objective; one warm up 'game' had the students pair up and together hold an elastic therapy band, on which they would try and exert these different forces. In order to remain stable, the students had to involve their body weight, which encouraged the activation of core abdominal muscles. See the activity cards in Appendix A for explanations of these tasks.

These skills were then used in the consequent movement tasks; in the 'water game', the artists created an imaginary wet world and encouraged students to play with each other 'in

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the water'. The artists would create such a context and introduce gestural movements such as 'holding buckets' and 'splashing water'. Movements that the students would otherwise not attempt enthusiastically, such as kicking, would come easily to the students in a scenario where everybody would be trying to 'splash' each other. Tasks were planned in such a way to give the students both enough structure and enough freedom to feel comfortable creating their own movements, and responding to each other's' movements spontaneously. The tasks did not delineate a 'right' and 'wrong' way of moving, but focused instead on maximising the participation and interaction of the students. Through imaginative and playful tasks, the students were able to interact and accept each other easily.

While present in the sessions, the staff were otherwise happy to let the artists be completely in charge. This confidence in the artists came from their adoption of key teaching approaches used by Papillon House, which the lead artist familiarised herself with during a period of observation at the school prior to the start of the project. For example, knowing the importance of routine, the artists were careful to maintain a familiar structure to the sessions, and understanding the difficulties with verbal communication, they used visual communication as far as possible.

In addition to established approaches of teaching young people with ASD, the artists introduced other principles that they felt were important for the sessions. All the tasks were planned with enough flexibility to cater for the 'mood' of the day. The artists felt that the students' energy levels could vary significantly from week to week and that it was important to sense this and ensure that activities were well-matched. Anusha explained, "the focus is on the young people - what do they need today? How are they feeling?" This flexible approach felt initially uncomfortable for the staff, who wanted to see clearer outcomes from the sessions and a faster pace. However, it became clear that this approach was responsible for the overwhelmingly trusting relationship that the young people managed to form with the artists and the sessions, and which ultimately enabled the artists to elicit more energy and participation from the students than the staff had thought was possible. Encouraging the students to focus on their breath was another important part of the sessions, which derived from Seema's experience with restorative Iyengar Yoga methods. The artists would encourage the students to position themselves in specific ways to achieve optimum breathing, while placing their hands on students' ribs and legs to



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encourage the release of tension. Although relaxation was a new activity for the students, it quickly became the most familiar part of every session and something that the staff have been keen to implement themselves even after the end of the project.

While the project mainly consisted of these weekly sessions with both classes, the lead artist was also able to deliver a weekly one-to-one session with a young person who had a particularly challenging experience of ASD. The following extract from Appendix B illustrates the benefit of a one-to-one approach by Anusha:

### **Case Study Extract : Young Person 'T' (Appendix B)**

T's particularly profound behavioural challenges and low-level developmental stage make it very tricky to identify any progression. However, there are specific changes that do indicate development. When the sessions began, T had two staff members with him at all times. Over the course of the year, he has become comfortable with only having one, to whom he is emotionally attached and seeks out at all times. Staff members explain that simply working with somebody new like Anusha is a serious accomplishment.

While T still chooses to sit separately in the corner during the group sessions, there have now been a few times when he has joined in to the activities alongside classmates. His class teacher Anne explains that the 1:1 sessions with Anusha have helped him become comfortable in the company of his classmates and vice versa.

His 1:1 sessions with Anusha have transformed significantly. While previously T would cover his eyes with his hands and keep his gaze and movement restricted in this way for the whole session, Anusha can now expect to him get up, approach her, lift his gaze, lower his hands and even extends his arms towards the space between them.



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### **3. What is the relevance of Indian dance to the challenges that young people with Autism Spectrum Disorder face?**

Bharatanatyam and Kathak are Indian classical dance forms that are, for all practical purposes, more than just dance forms. With a fundamental grounding in imaginative storytelling and spiritual fulfillment, these forms are rich with physical and emotional tools that can appropriately address the very complex and individualised needs of young people on the autistic spectrum. In addition to teaching bodily control and skill, these art forms offer access to movement through the channels of rhythm, music, stories, gesture, facial expression and imaginative improvisation. As a result, children and young people are able to find self-expression through the form, without having to depend on verbal instructions, choreographed movement sequences or high levels of physical training. Emotional and personal communication is at the centre of these classical Indian art forms, which make the highly-trained dance artists particularly skilled at encouraging and eliciting the self-expression of the children and young people that they work with. Through ROaR, the dance artists have discovered the real versatility of these art forms; though each class houses a huge variety of behavioural challenges, they have been able to tailor the movement tasks differently for different young people.

#### **3.1 Classical Grounding Of These Dance Forms**

The technical rules that underlie Bharatanatyam and Kathak gives them a specific aesthetic code that dancers spend many years training in. It is this technical underpinning that makes these styles 'classical' and differentiates them from folk, bollywood or modern styles of dance. This rigour creates more physically demanding dance forms that are more rewarding to those who practise them, including community and non-professional practitioners. In the case of Papillon House, the physical demands are specifically beneficial as the children and young people lack strength and many also have hypermobility, which further exacerbates their lack of physical agility. It is thought that a major cause of these tendencies is a lack of motivation to engage in physical activities, and this project has found that Indian Dance provides both the opportunity to strengthen their bodies and the enticement to participate.

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In both Bharatanatyam and Kathak, the extension of limbs into their full range forms an important part of the aesthetic. The predisposition of the artists to fully reaching out the arms and legs and maintaining maximal extension made them particularly conscious that the young people would refrain from stretching or fully exploiting their muscle flexibility. The artists made sure to address this reluctance in warm-up games that required the students to contract and extend specific muscles. Even creative movement tasks focused on increasing range of motion and flexibility within the students' bodies.

While contemporary forms of dance often focus on the dynamics with which movement is carried out, there is a strong focus in classical Indian dance on the particular shapes that the body can create and hold. These postures can be abstract geometrical shapes, or they can be narrative, for example creating a shape to portray an animal or tree. Holding postures requires a level of muscular control that these young people found challenging at first. However, they were able to relate these symbolic postures to their daily experience, and this visual enticement meant that the students always attempted this physical challenge. Artists introduced warm-up games, such as 'Stop and Go', that built on the muscular control and coordination required to go suddenly from movement to stillness.

While classical Indian dance demands considerable physical stamina and fitness, there is also a unique emphasis on smaller, more isolated movements of the body. Unlike other forms of dance that emphasise large movements through space, Indian dance requires manipulating separately the smaller 'limbs' such as fingers, the head, the wrists, the ankles and the feet. Artists introduced these isolated movements in activities such as 'Row The Boat' where the young people were required to engage only specific muscles, and this detailed movement work made for a more whole-body experience. PH makes an effort to develop functional movement capabilities in their students, to enable them to live more comfortably and independently in mainstream daily life. These activities which focused on developing isolated muscle control, played an important part in increasing the repertoire of movement available to these young people ; teaching the students to 'tuck their toes' was a meaningful achievement for the artists as it enabled the young people to stand up independently from a prostrate position for the first time.

While most dance forms and exercise classes are physically demanding in some way, classical indian dance particularly emphasises movements that require a highly skilled

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control of muscles; maximal limb extension, sudden stillness, creating geometric shapes with the body, and isolating the movement of smaller limbs requires a higher level of bodily engagement from the young people. Furthermore, a core obstacle to these students engaging in physical activities is a lack of motivation, which can undermine the potential benefits of any physical activity. However, Indian dance has proven to be spectacularly exciting at PH and the young people have not suffered from a lack of motivation to engage; it is the musical and uniquely imaginative aspects of this dance practice that have allowed them to overcome the usual obstacles to engaging in physical activity, making it particularly successful as a strategy to address ASD.

### **3.2 Centrality of Music to Indian Dance**

Unlike many forms of contemporary dance, classical Indian dance is inseparable from its musical accompaniment. Music provides the rhythmic basis for movement, the mood for the emotional content and the pace of the movement. This centrality of music meant that the artists used music right from the beginning of the session in the warm-up, to the last relaxation activity. Music was an important channel of communication between the artists and the students at PH, and offered the young people another way of accessing the movement tasks. While music is a pleasure that is freely accessible for most of society, it has been rewarding to introduce the students to music that they would otherwise not like or seek out and watch them take pleasure in it.

The continuous engagement with music helped to keep the artists' interactions with the young people more non-verbal. This was important because many of them were pre-verbal, echelatic or faced difficulties in speech. Verbal instructions from the artists could lead to them disengaging from the activity; responding to musical cues rather than verbal instructions enabled more participation. One of the challenges for special schools like PH is conducting educational activities that cater to the very strong likes and dislikes of the young people on the autistic spectrum. The variety of instruments and stories that inform Indian music (e.g. it is not limited to piano music, or the bass-heavy music of hip-hop) allowed the artists to draw upon a broad musical canon and be directly flexible to the needs of the students that day. For example, one of the children had strong dislikes in music, and would become overwhelmed with particular sounds. Despite this, he engaged fully with the sessions and its music usage. Class teacher Anne put this down to the musical variety and non-repetitiveness of the sessions. She also highlighted this responsiveness of

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the sessions as one of the key strengths of the project; the artists were able to tailor the session to appropriately cater for the mood of the young people on that specific day. This responsiveness was a significant factor in the strong trust that developed between the artists and students, which eventually resulted in unusually sustained interest from the young people over the long-term duration of the project.

Rhythm is a central feature in classical Indian dance and played a large part in the activities. While rhythmic skill might seem to belong in the realm of musicians and dancers, it is a vital element of functional movement. It directs the body to move with consistency, rather than leaving movements to the whim of physical impulses, and thus increases physical coordination and reduces the chance of injury. It is innate to most behavioural movement and can create an intuitive and subconscious response in the body that bypasses the need for deliberate decision-making. This was particularly beneficial for the young people at PH who faced various difficulties in verbal and visual processing. Rhythm allowed them to access the movement, copy it and create it through another channel. It also resulted in them being more energetic than usual. They often began moving and dancing before the staff and artists had even given instructions. These enthusiastic responses were met with surprise from the staff. Class teacher Kim reflected that, "it's like they're different children during the sessions...they don't look like they have any challenges!"

The rich musical variety that underpins the creative-classical dance sessions offered a nonverbal route for the young people to access the movement tasks. The dance artists observed that this intuitive engagement with the movement was less affected by the processing delay that can accompany instructions, and even physical challenges were less obstructive to the participation of the students. Surprisingly for the staff, the music was extremely varied and thus not uncomfortable for the young people who had strong dislikes for certain types of music. This variety offered a flexibility to the artists, who were able to attune the session to the energy levels of the staff and students on that day.

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### 3.3 Fantastical Worlds

The most fundamental aspect of Indian dance, and that which makes it the most appropriate for contexts like PH is its grounding in storytelling, imagination and emotion. The classical styles of Bharatanatyam and Kathak did not arise from an appreciation of abstract movement, but from the desire to communicate human experience. As a result, the vocabulary of these forms is rich with human experience; hand gestures and facial expressions combine to create imaginary characters, animals and environments. The theoretical texts that underpin these dance forms emphasise the genuine arising of emotion in the dancer and the audience member as the key purpose of the dance form. As a result, the artists that lead the sessions at PH were both skilled in the unambiguous communication of emotion and sensitive to the responses of their students.

Their predisposition to seeking out emotion enabled them to have empathetic interactions with the young people; rather than being satisfied with the simple physical involvement of the students, the artists naturally sought out the emotional engagement of the students. Their comfort with being theatrical allowed them to be more childlike and dance alongside the students rather than maintain the distance that comes with authority. This is what the staff at PH have claimed is responsible for the remarkable emotional connection that developed between the two artists and their students. PH is a highly protected environment with few visitors; class teacher Anne explained that there is a clear structure and protocol, and outsiders are treated with caution, for fear that they might overwhelm the students or that the students might hurt the visitors. "To have outsiders come in, be very physically involved very quickly, and for us to step back and let that happen has been really interesting," she says. It became very clear that the young people were actively seeking out interaction with the artists in every session.

In creating an imaginary, fantastical world in the classroom, the artists enabled the children and young people to create scenarios for themselves where interacting with each other was less problematic, more natural, and even necessary. For example, in order for them to enjoy 'walking through the trees', it was necessary for them to accept other classmates as the trees. Where usually they would avoid interacting with each other, they actively approached each other when embodying 'bees' that were buzzing around flowers, as 'birds' searching for worms, and even as themselves eating and sharing their imaginary pizza. Relating to one another like this became cumulative over the course of the year, and

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instances of the young people positively interacting became more frequent with each session. These moments were revelations for the staff, who had previously highlighted peer-to-peer interaction as a significant challenge for their students.

Unlike conventional dance classes where the students are taught particular movements, the focus of these sessions was mainly on enabling the young people to create their own movements. The lead artist would introduce a character with a few simple hand gestures, facial expressions and body movements and emphasise the resulting character rather than the movements themselves. This approach enabled the students to primarily read the emotion of the character and interpret the movements as they wanted. Sometimes the students would imitate the movement introduced, and at other times they would change the movement to suit their own expression of the character. By encouraging the students to respond imaginatively in this way, the sessions created space for them to make independent decisions and accept their own contributions to the imaginary world. This has been an important way of developing a higher self-esteem and also reducing the habitual tendency to simply copy rather than create.

The artists would be delighted when the students interpreted a movement in their own way, or sought out interactions with one other, as these were some of the key desirable outcomes. This reinforced for the students too that the purpose of the sessions was not to get something right or wrong, but to engage in their own way. By encouraging an imaginary environment rather than a movement, it was more comfortable for the students to interpret the scenario on their own terms and create their own movements. These small steps towards independent decision-making were very significant for both the staff and the artists. "All dance is about an awareness of your body, but there's definitely a sense of fun and light-heartedness with Indian Dance," said class teacher Kim.

The creative-classical Indian dance sessions offered a huge variety of movement possibilities, unrestricted by technical rules, musical genre or the contemporary preoccupation with being abstract. It offered the students at Papillon House an alternative world in which their imaginations and stories were encouraged, and their independent movement contributions were valued. The enticement that this kind of fantastical world offered overcame the lack of motivation that usually accompanies physical activities, to enable the young people to work on their physical strength, coordination and repertoire of

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movement. The dance artists have used the versatility of the art form to tailor the sessions appropriately for the needs of the young people, whether that meant focusing more in some tasks on peer interaction, and on rhythmic and musical engagement in others. The ability of the dance artists to clearly communicate human emotions through gestures, facial expressions, intricate movements of the hands, rhythm and storytelling enabled them to form significant bonds with the young people, which in turn has proven to the Papillon House staff that their students are very capable of accepting and building relationships with complete outsiders.

### **Case Study Extract : Young Person 'J' (Appendix B)**

By the end of the year of sessions, J was perhaps one of the most engaged young people in the group. He followed all the instructions given by Anusha without any need for individual prompting and was enthusiastic to join into the activities even when arriving later and not knowing what the activity was. He even accepted touch from other classmates in partnering games.

J developed a close bond with both the artists and would seek out interaction with them. He attempted the hand gestures that were offered to him and engaged in the imaginative play actively; he would not only receive movement from the artists but would often give them back his movement, making for a very playful and interactive engagement.



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## 4. What specifically made ROaR a successful project?

Participation in the sessions increased significantly over the course of the year, and students in both classes became more engaged and enthusiastic about the movement tasks. The artists have seen tangible improvements in the physical capacities of their students, including flexibility, physical control and the repertoire of movement that the students have access to in their bodies, and peer interaction has been the most startling improvement, with students seeking out each other and the artists in the movement tasks. The students developed a clear comfort working with music and imaginative movement improvisation. A more detailed analysis of the changes in students can be found in the case studies attached to this report in Appendix B. Significantly for the project's longer term aims, the staff at Papillon House have been overwhelmingly positive about the impact of the project and are keen to see the dance artists return for another year of creative dance sessions. One class teacher remarked that she is "very humbled by Akademi...for them to get the funding and be here."

However, she also highlighted the careful planning and thoughtful delivery that underpins this project's success, and commented that this kind of venture "is a very delicate thing...you could get this very wrong and be really unsuccessful." This report would like to draw attention to some of the factors behind this project that have played a significant role in bringing about its benefits to the young people at PH and which future projects should endeavour to include. Anusha and Seema delivered holistic sessions that drew on dance, movement, improvisation, breathwork, song, narrative, theatricality and relaxation and the importance of this richness cannot be understated. It allowed for sessions to be accessible to all types of young people, and to be responsive to the needs of the students, both in terms of their individual needs and their needs as a group on specific days.

The prior experience of the dance artists with community settings gave them a heightened sensitivity to these individual needs, and both artists were careful to tailor their behaviour for the needs of the students. For example, when a young person suffered from severe Sensory Processing Delays the artists were careful to not to overload them with information; when a young person had significant skill in mirroring the actions of others, the artists would use this to engage them in movements that they would otherwise not be able to do. The artists were able to offer one-to-one support to somebody who struggled to

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participate in group scenarios and the staff found that this individual attention made the young person to more comfortable in the group sessions; he went from completely withdrawing from group sessions to standing up and joining in the movement tasks in the same space as his peers.

The involvement of the teaching staff in the project has been of paramount importance to its success. They have contributed to the project's initial planning, have participated fully in the sessions alongside their students (despite many inhibitions about dancing and music), and engaged in active feedback and reflection with Akademi throughout the project's delivery. This has contributed to the project's benefits outlasting the duration of the actual project; for example both class teachers have been positive about incorporating relaxation sessions into their classes. Akademi has also been in regular conversation with PH, both in person and on the phone, to ensure that the project is satisfying the outcomes identified by the staff. All the parties involved in the project have highlighted the importance of the projects' approaches continuing to be implemented in the school, and by families at home, after it has ended.

This project has prioritised a longer-term outlook, rather than short-term goals. The lead artist in charge of planning and delivering the weekly sessions was engaged in a period of observation at PH prior to the start of the project, in order to understand both the complexity of the students' needs and the approaches used by the school that the students were familiar with. Akademi has run mentoring sessions with the artists during the project year to gather reflections, share expertise and continually improve the delivery of sessions based on these experiences. When asked what they thought was important to the success of the project, both staff members emphasised the year-long duration of the project as vital to its benefits. "This would not have happened in a 12 week program... it takes a lot of time," explained one class teacher. Over the course of the year, the artists were able to understand each of the young people's needs and develop personal strategies to enable the students' participation. Autism spectrum disorder can severely affect young people's ability to have relational experiences with other people, especially those that they have not known for a long period of time. The year offered a long enough time window for the young people to try tasks and activities that felt uncomfortable, and also begin to enjoy them. Much to the joy of the PH staff, they were able to develop trust and rapport with

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adults that came from outside of the PH environment, signalling hope for their lives in mainstream society.

These small but significant points of progress would not have been possible in a shorter-term project, or a project that did not fully engage the system and staff of the school, or indeed in a project that was focused on dancing. The Reach Out and Reveal project has managed to combine a number of factors that give it an outstanding potential in this field of education and both the project facilitators and the Papillon House School staff hope to see the project able to offer its experience to more children and young people suffering from autism spectrum disorder.

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## **APPENDIX A: LEARNING CARDS FOR EDUCATORS**

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## APPENDIX B: CASE STUDIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE AT PAPILLON HOUSE

### 1. "J"

**Special Educational Needs:** Sensory Processing Delay (SPD), profound Epilepsy  
**Communication:** Treatment of epilepsy has taken away J's speech, which was previously fluid. PH staff explains that he spent the last year extremely frustrated and sad as a result. The speech is very gradually starting to appear again.

**Behaviour:** J struggles to focus due to his epilepsy and medication. He has a fear of failure that interferes with his participation in activities.

**Likes:** Films, family, ball games, jumping, trampolines, cuddling

**Dislikes:** Loud noises, busyness

#### Initial response to the sessions

J started with quite low confidence in the sessions; he would avoid making eye contact and would struggle with maintaining focus. As a result, following instructions and joining into activities with classmates was a particular challenge.

#### How has J changed?

By the end of the year of sessions, J was perhaps one of the most engaged young people in the group. He followed all the instructions given by Anusha without any need for individual prompting and was enthusiastic to join into the activities even when arriving later and not knowing what the activity was. He even accepted touch from other classmates in partnering games.

J developed a close bond with both the artists and would seek out interaction with them. He attempted the hand gestures that were offered to him and engaged in the imaginative play actively; he would not only receive movement from the artists but would often give them back his movement, making for a very playful and interactive engagement.

He became more comfortable with eye contact, and would even greet visitors to the sessions that he was not familiar with.

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## 2. "D"

**Special Educational Needs:** Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), Sensory Processing Delay (SPD), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD).

**Communication:** D is verbal but chooses not to talk most of the time: ODD and PDA put him in a tricky place because he says no to everything even if he wants to respond positively.

**Behaviour:** When stressed D can behave in a way that looks like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder such as turning lights on and off repeatedly, and shutting and opening the door.

**Likes:** Water play, being outside, the playground

**Dislikes:** Pens, paper, worksheets, any pressure or time limits

### Initial response to the sessions

Due to D's complex challenges, he would find it very difficult to participate in the group sessions. He would refuse offers to participate or contribute and would stand away from his classmates in a corner of the classroom. He would not make eye contact with Anusha and would repeatedly try and leave the classroom. It was not uncommon for D to spend most of the time clapping or engaging in other repetitive activities.

### How has D changed?

It took D time to begin to feel comfortable in the sessions, but began participating around 10 weeks into the project. By the end of the project, there was a significant lack of opposition when working with Anusha; he would not tend to refuse her offers, or would say 'no' while laughing and joining it; an indication that his refusal is not deliberate. Occasionally D would turn away from Anusha when he heard her say an instruction, and this significantly more mild type of reaction was encouraging for the staff.

Although it would take D longer to catch onto the activity than his classmates, he would not withdraw from the group. There were many instances of him joining in with his classmates in group activities, such as when a fellow classmate approached him in an activity that required clapping with a partner.

### What specific approaches were used by the artists for D?

SPD means that it can take D upto 8 mins to process an instruction; if in between that time he is asked again, it will reset the 8 mins needed for processing. This required Anusha to be very careful not to repeat instructions to D.

When D is engaging in obsessive behaviour, it is more effective for the staff member to agree an endpoint with him rather than tell him to stop. This is because of his strong dislike of pressure or time limits. Anusha would avoid pressuring D to hurry, or listen, or to stop doing something. Aware of his difficulties with ODD, Anusha was careful to present choices to D rather than ask him questions that he could easily answer 'no' to and refuse.

## 3. "P"

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**Literacy:** P can read and write

**Communication:** Verbal communication is low; echolalic - just repeats words without understanding the meaning

**Behaviour:** Independent action and decision making is difficult - P finds it difficult not to copy somebody else

**Likes:** Interacting with people (though it can be sometimes difficult to discern because it is difficult for P to not copy those around him, even if he is not enjoying it)

**Dislikes:** Specific music - hates jingles/ cartoon music / movie soundtracks / supermarket beeps / high-pitched sounds; being nagged

### **Initial response to the sessions**

P was not immediately engaged in the movement and seemed lethargic. He has taken approximately 3 months to begin to engage in the sessions. However, despite his strong dislike of most types of music, he was not at all been bothered by the sound of bells or dance music.

### **How has P changed?**

The artists say that he is one of the young people that engages the most with the sessions now; they find it easy to interact with him and create a dialogue. He is much more playful and responsive, especially with the assistant artist Seema. He particularly benefits from the relaxation part of the session, where he takes on cues to breathe more deeply and release muscle tension.

P's movement quality has significantly changed; he is much more active in the sessions and stands up and sits down with more ease. His attention to detail has also increased, which is clear from his use of *hastas* (hand gestures).

The lead artist Anusha reports back that he is playing more independently. There have been instances of him breaking away from the group and creating movement that is at a different speed or pattern to that which was initially introduced.

There used to be a lot of conflict between him and classmate 'C' but teachers are seeing less and less of that, to the extent that they are now doing activities together in the sessions. Teachers have highlighted this as an immense change.

P's family say that he taking more independent initiative home such as when dressing himself and in the kitchen. He has started laying out food on the table, using trays and putting on his oven gloves. His class teacher Anne feels that this is down to Anusha's movement sessions.

## **4. "T"**

**SEN:** T is very profoundly autistic; he is low-level developmental at P3 on the P-scale



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**Communication:** No verbal communication - he only uses voice when very comfortable in his environment; no formalised signing

**Behaviour:** Attention to environment is fleeting; T has a staff member with him full-time

**Challenges:** Very limited repertoire of movement; doesn't take notice of symbols; sensorially overwhelmed; will use his hands to block out his visual input; processing time is slower than peers

**Likes:** Very few likes

### **Initial response to the sessions**

In addition to the group sessions with classmates and both artists, T has had special one-to-one non-verbal sessions with Anusha every week where she is able to use a much more tailored approach for his specific needs.

### **How has T changed?**

T's particularly profound behavioural challenges and low-level developmental stage make it very tricky to identify any progression. However, there are specific changes that do indicate development. When the sessions began, T had two staff members with him at all times. Over the course of the year, he has become comfortable with only having one, to whom he is emotionally attached and seeks out at all times. Staff members explain that simply working with somebody new like Anusha is a serious accomplishment.

While T still chooses to sit separately in the corner during the group sessions, there have now been a few times when he has joined in to the activities alongside classmates. His class teacher Anne explains that the 1:1 sessions with Anusha have helped him become comfortable in the company of his classmates and vice versa. His 1:1 sessions with Anusha have transformed significantly. While previously T would cover his eyes with his hands and keep his gaze and movement restricted in this way for the whole session, Anusha can now expect to him get up, approach her, lift his gaze, lower his hands and even extends his arms towards the space between them.

Significantly for T, he has become comfortable with touch from those other than his full-time staff member. In recent sessions he engaged in a playful game with Anusha where both people were trying to tag each other with their legs. Staff were amazed when he recently high-fived a classmate.

Although it is difficult to evidence this result back to his work with Anusha, T's mother reports that his behaviour at home is significantly different as he engages with friends and family more than before. Staff have also been excited to see him now opening doors.