

Dance Connect

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On behalf of Akademi (South Asian Dance UK)

1 Introduction

With support from the European Social Fund (ESF) – a first for the organisation - Akademi ran the extensive and highly successful *Dance Connect* project from 2 September 2001 to 29 August 2003. Conceived and managed by our education and community department, the project reached 120 young people aged 13-19 in some of the most deprived communities in London. Covering Newham, Tower Hamlets and Barnet, *Dance Connect* aimed to support efforts to reverse deprivation trends at the root by tackling the skills-gap that leaves many young people in these areas potentially unemployable. Key to this process was reintegrating disaffected young people into mainstream learning while encouraging them to take a positive approach to education. South Asian dance and music, as well as other artforms - film, design, literature – proved the perfect mobiliser. Working towards three large-scale, professional productions - *Shifting Footprints*, *Escapade* and *FUZE*, challenged participants, ultimately leading to greater levels of confidence and self-esteem.

'at first I didn't have the confidence and had to hide in corners, but then my confidence improved' – project participant

2 Aims & objectives

Aims

- To reintegrate disaffected young people aged 13-19 into mainstream learning
- To encourage more positive attitudes to learning and achievement among young people who have become marginalised and alienated from school
- To increase participants' self-esteem and confidence, and equip them with skills that will help them at school and work
- To increase the appreciation and understanding of South Asian dance and culture

Objectives

- To use art forms as an alternative means to access learning (eg. South Asian dance, video, design, music)
- To teach basic skills, such as English, through alternative mediums like songwriting and journalism, to encourage young people to overcome potential barriers to learning
- To allow young people to be creative and gain ownership over their work while at the same time teaching them new skills that will increase their employability
- To work with each cohort on the development, production and performance of the material they create

3 Project delivery

3.1 Partnerships

Building on relationships established through our previous education and community activity, the project covered the boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets and Barnet, complementing several local initiatives, such as those led by Newham Education Action Zone (EAZ) and Newham Education Refugee Team. In addition to these, we partnered with Stratford Circus, the Bull Arts Centre/artsdepot (Barnet) and, of course, the four participating schools (see 3.2). Within these areas, there were currently no projects aimed at our target group that used South Asian dance and

related artforms to build basic skills such as team-working, problem-solving, interpersonal communication, ICT and the ability to be flexible and adaptable to given situations. *Dance Connect* was therefore well placed to address this gap in provision in these localities.

3.2 Profile of participants

Participants were drawn from some of the most disadvantaged groups in the target areas: ethnic minority people, particularly African, Bangladeshi and refugee young people, and young women from ethnic minority backgrounds. They were selected on the basis of high levels of alienation and disengagement from learning. Aged 13-19, they had either been or were at risk of being excluded from school, and consequently considered to be at risk of long-term disaffection and economic exclusion upon leaving school.¹ 84% of participants were from ethnic minorities and 58% were young women, 80% of whom were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Fig.i. Participants by ethnic group (total numbers)

	Male	Female	All
White - British	5	14	19
White - Irish	0	1	1
Mixed – white and black African	0	4	4
Mixed other	0	6	6
Asian or Asian British – Indian	11	6	17
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	8	3	11
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	7	12	19
Asian or Asian British – other	5	1	6
Black or black British – Caribbean	4	9	13
Black or black British – African	8	10	18
Black or black British – other	1	2	3
Not known	1	2	3
Totals	50	70	120

Of the 120 participants, 56 came from Little Ilford School (Newham), 17 from Central Foundation School for Girls (Tower Hamlets), 19 from Barnet College and 28 from Whitefield School (Barnet). Participants were divided into five cohorts (two at Little Ilford and one each at the remaining schools).

Fig.ii. Distribution of participants by age and sex

Age	Male	Female	Totals
12	2	1	3
13	13	10	23
14	5	15	20
15	26	26	52
16	0	2	2
17	2	12	14
18	0	4	4
Not known	2	0	2
Totals	50	70	120

3.3 Participating artists

¹ For instance, according to the DfEE (2000), the percentage average of permanent exclusions in Tower Hamlets and Newham were 0.81% and 0.97% respectively, compared to a national average of 0.33%.

Eight artists were selected from our pool of freelancers, all of whom are respected practitioners in their field and have extensive experience as workshop leaders/contributors. The artists came from a range of backgrounds to promote as wide a skills base as possible.

Fig.iii. *Dance Connect* artists

Name	Specialism	Role	Location
Kauser Butt	journalist/counsellor/ report writer	workshop leader	Little Ilford School Central Foundation Girls' School
Chix Chandaria	dancer/choreographer (Bollywood style)	workshop leader	Little Ilford School
Roswitha Chesher	video artist/film producer/editor	workshop artist	Little Ilford School, Central Foundation Girls' School, Barnet College, Whitefield School
Naz Karim	dancer/choreographer (bhangra)/costume designer	workshop leader	Little Ilford School, Whitefield School
Joan Pires	dancer/choreographer (Bollywood style)	workshop leader	Central Foundation Girls' School, Barnet College
DJ Ritu	DJ	workshop leader	Little Ilford School
Anju Sharda	songwriter	workshop leader	Central Foundation Girls' School, Whitefield School
Gurjit Sihra	dhol drummer	workshop artist	Whitefield School

3.4 *Project management*

Dance Connect was managed by the project co-ordinator, Nicola Froud (education and community officer, Akademi). Overall responsibility for the financial management of the project lay with Akademi's director, Mira Kaushik, who was accountable to the project's steering group for delivering the project's outcomes and for its effective financial control.

3.5 *Project structure*

Dance Connect was divided into three phases.

1. **Development** – All participants were invited to open discussions about the project. They completed their registration forms and spoke to the artists about what they wanted to achieve and what skills they felt needed improvement. The eligibility of all participants was checked on registration, followed by an induction session. Each participant received a diary to record and review their progress and personal development for the duration of the project. During this phase, the artists and project co-ordinator met with the teachers and support staff to ensure that the goals of the participants were realistic and to ensure adequate support would be provided for them.
2. **Production** – All participants took part in a series of intensive workshops involving a daily class at which each student's progress was monitored. Sessions addressed issues such as team-building and communication skills. These were then built upon through workshops aimed at developing ICT,

literacy and other basic skills. Participants worked toward the creation of a professional production, assuming roles as performers, production crew or reporters, depending on their aptitude and preferences. Beneficiaries of the project were expected to attend all sessions, and overall, attendance was excellent.

- 3. Performance** – This final phase consisted of public performances of multi-media dance pieces developed in phase 2, at appropriate venues. The Little Ilford School groups performed with other schools in *Shifting Footprints* at Stratford Circus on 5 July 2002. Whitefield School, Central Foundation School for Girls, Barnet College and Little Ilford School all performed in the *Dance Connect* finale, *FUZE*, at the Bull Arts Centre on 4 June 2003. The Barnet College group also went on to perform in Akademi's *Escapade*, a large, site-specific performance at the South Bank Centre on 1 and 2 August 2003.

3.6 Artistic content

Dance Connect's success lay in its use of popular artforms to reach its participants. Workshop leaders and artists met students on familiar ground, demonstrating their knowledge of and interest in those artistic expressions currently embraced by their target group. By comparing and contrasting less familiar forms, such as Bollywood or bhangra dance, with recognised forms, artists were able to make the learning experience relevant and compelling to participants.

Students were taught a number of artforms, including: Bollywood and bhangra dance, DJ-ing, drumming, songwriting, journalism, costume design and film production. Through these, participants developed a range of basic and specialised skills (see 4.2 below). The following examples illustrate further some of the artforms introduced through the project.

Bollywood/bhangra dance

Participants learnt Bollywood and bhangra dance moves, gaining awareness of their bodies in the process through the postures and gestures. These forms were introduced not simply as physical gestures, but as the products of a specific cultural context. At the same time, their similarities to more familiar forms, such as street dance, were also demonstrated, thus rendering them more accessible and lending them greater credibility in the eyes of participants. In most cases, participants had a chance to work together on creating a choreographic piece for a public performance. This not only encouraged team-working skills, but also inspired participants to adopt and maintain high standards throughout.

I've learnt how to be patient and how to work in a group and support each other. – Zean Dyer, 12, Little Ilford School

I have learnt more dance moves and I have become more confident and outgoing ... It's been absolutely amazing! – Ndali Egbunike, 15, Whitefield School

Dhol drumming

Participants were introduced to bhangra rhythms through the dhol – a percussion instrument traditionally used to accompany bhangra dance. The drumming technique is easily accessible, and students were able to observe quick progress on the instrument. Participants developed their understanding of rhythm and timing as well as the ability to listen to other members of the group and coordinate themselves

musically. They went on to create an impressive, professional piece for the *Dance Connect* finale at the Bull in FUZE.

WOW this is so cool. I never imagined I would like it that much' – Ashleigh Zuobgo, 15, Whitefield School

Songwriting

Students learnt the essential principles of singing and songwriting, including breathing, relaxation, writing lyrics and composing melodies. As part of this, they learnt Indian scales (*raag*), marrying these with contemporary vocal expressions, such as rap. Together, participants brainstormed and wrote their own songs, thus learning how to work as a group and offer mutual support when necessary.

I've loved the workshops and listening to each other's ideas. I think what we've written is really interesting and the whole group contributed lines to the final song. – Lucky, 15, Central Foundation School for Girls

It's been a lot of fun, especially doing the rapping. I've learnt how to write lyrics and a melody. I would like to set up a music club in school.

– Naveed Azam, 13, Little Ilford School

Film-making

Sessions covered the basics of videography, including filming (framing shots/shot sizes), finding suitable locations for a given subject and the art of storyboarding. Many students had a chance to film their colleagues from the dance and songwriting groups performing their final pieces – in effect, making a pop or dance video. Students also learnt to digitally edit some of the video material they shot.

At the beginning I was nervous, but as the weeks went on, I started to feel excited and I think my confidence has grown. I would like to use my camera skills to film family weddings. – Ismatin Latif, 13, Little Ilford School

Dance Connect's success was not only demonstrated by high quality performances at Stratford Circus, the Bull and the Royal Festival Hall, but also by its ability to break down social barriers between students, fostering mutual respect and praise between those who did not normally socialise together. That the artforms were introduced to participants as something related to their own experience meant that these South Asian disciplines – and South Asian culture in general - were seen as an integral part of contemporary British culture.

4 Outcomes

4.1 Evaluation (methodology)

Project outcomes were evaluated through the use of independent learning plans, tracking forms, diaries, interviews with pupil counsellors, group feedback after each session and occasionally, video recordings. Artists and teachers met regularly with the project co-ordinator who reported their comments to Akademi's director and Board quarterly. The performances proved a useful external evaluation tool as they generated numerous comments, reports and reviews. Monitoring was carried out by the project co-ordinator as well as an external evaluator.

Not only was Shifting Footprints a high quality performance, getting the best from the young people involved it also conveyed a very poignant and moving message.
– Haydn Powell, Newham Excellence in Cities Co-ordinator

I was very impressed by the imagination, energy and commitment shown by all the participants – Nigel Pittman, Chief Executive, London Arts on *Shifting Footprints*

4.2 Improving skills and attitudes

Dance Connect focused on achieving 'soft' outcomes (or outcomes that cannot necessarily be measured empirically); in other words, it sought to develop skills that would improve the life chances of participants. Feedback from teachers and support workers noted a dramatic change in participants' attitudes to learning over the course of the project.

This project has been really successful – the best so far. ... We have had 100% attendance and I have been very impressed. – Kate Chadwick, drama teacher, Little Ilford School

One of the girls in the video project has been so focused and I've never seen her like that in school. – Lesley Bara-Bara, learning mentor, Central Foundation School for Girls

Participants had access to a range of equipment, including PC/Mac computers and software (desktop and laptop), video cameras and equipment, mixing decks, PA equipment and musical instruments. With these, they developed a series of practical skills, including:

- Journalism – improved English literacy through enhanced written skills
- Design – improved craft and planning skills through the creation of storyboards and designing/creating costumes
- Video – improved IT, planning and design skills through the creation of storyboards and use of technology to shoot and edit video footage
- Dance – improved movement and body control (and awareness), improved team-working skills
- Music – improved movement and body control; improved numeracy skills through awareness of rhythm

In terms of attitude, participants demonstrated

- higher levels of self esteem, confidence and self-belief
- a positive attitude toward learning
- increased attendance at school – which continued after the project finished
- commitment and perseverance
- increased social skills
- mutual respect and support, even for those they didn't normally socialise with
- an appreciation of the opportunity to learn music and dance from another cultural origin

Additionally, students of South Asian origin increased their awareness of aspects of their cultural heritage, which led to feelings of pride, while participants from other ethnic backgrounds, gained an appreciation of South Asian dance and culture.

The success of the project illustrated how effectively the arts could be used as an alternative means of accessing learning. It taught new, transferable skills while

giving young people the creative space to put them into practice. By providing participants with hands-on experience, *Dance Connect* ultimately raised the young people's expectations of themselves, equipped them with concrete skills and increased their learning capacity, making them more adaptable to change – all of which have enhanced their employability.

I'm really into Bollywood dancing, but I've learnt some more traditional moves. ... I think this week will help me to get into the music industry.

– Polly, 15, Central Foundation School for Girls

I've learnt what all the different buttons on the camera do, shot sizes and how to do a storyboard. I would like to make my own film now.

– Selina Akhtar, 13, Little Ilford School

4.3 Media coverage and dissemination

Dance Connect reached 120 participants and a further 1,000 people from the wider community through public performances. These included *Shifting Footprints* at Stratford Circus in June 2002 and *FUZE* at the Bull in June 2004. Press coverage included the *Newham Recorder* and *West Ham Community News Forum*. Video films of each cohort were created and screened as part of the above performances. Akademi's education and community department regularly shows these films to potential clients/funders/contributing artists to illustrate the type of work we do.

Escapade, Akademi's large-scale, site-specific outdoor extravaganza on the South Bank in August 2003, proved perhaps the most substantial platform for the project. Participants from Barnet College appeared as 'Bollywood Superstars' alongside a pulsing array of carnival, dance and music acts. *Escapade* not only attracted an immediate audience of over 16,000 people, but achieved coverage in over 35 publications (eg. *Guardian*, *Independent*, *The Times*, *Time Out*) and broadcasts. Two radio interviews with the Barnet college group for BBC Three Counties Radio focused heavily on *Dance Connect* and the *FUZE* performance earlier that summer. And Sony Asia Entertainment Television created a documentary film of *Escapade* which was broadcast on its network internationally – reaching several thousand viewers.

The South Bank plays host to one of the biggest outdoor shows in its history. –Judith Mackrell on *Escapade* in the *Guardian Guide*, 26 July-1 Aug 2003

4.4 Conclusion

The success of *Dance Connect* enhanced our reputation for using innovative approaches to encourage learning. Many of the participating schools were very keen to work with us again, and we have reinforced our links with the organisations we partnered with during the life of the project. We also developed new links, most significant of which was our successful application to the European Social Fund (without its support, the project would have been much smaller leading to a much narrower impact).

Dance Connect has generated valuable resources for our education and community department, such as video material for marketing purposes (see 4.3). It also forms the basis of a new education pack, currently under research and development. In the end, *Dance Connect* achieved all its stated aims and has validated our continued commitment to toppling barriers to learning through the deft deployment of the arts.

You can see the real educational value of the project. ... I would definitely like Akademi to come back to work with us again.

Rhian Rawling, music teacher, Whitefield School

*[I]t was lovely to be transported for a short time into a world of powerful and poignant emotions interspersed with a high standard of dance and music. Another triumph for Akademi – Pam Belmour, headteacher, Little Ilford School on *Shifting Footprints**