What's the point? Sharing poetry and communication in special schools

Stephen Hawking Special School in Limehouse, in the borough of Tower Hamlets, East London is a school where most pupils have profound and multiple learning difficulties. It is close to a busy thoroughfare, in an area that OfSTED described as being of "high social deprivation, where the vast majority of pupils come from homes where English is not the first language." It is also a small school bursting with life and colour. A walk down the corridors, rubbing shoulder with vibrant displays of the children's work, will show any visitor that this is a truly multi- sensory school. Even the small playground has been designed to stimulate and calm, and most importantly to develop communication. It was not surprising then that Keith Park, teacher, poet and performer, should choose this school to illustrate some of his techniques, and talk to *Special Children* about the background to his groundbreaking work with children and young people with learning needs.

Molly Doyle, class teacher and Creative Coordinator, explained how the school originally invited Keith to do an evenings' staff training. Keith's session, based on 'Little Red Riding Hood', made such an impression that this led to him being involved with the school over the period of a school year, with each class working with Keith for the equivalent of four and a half days.
During this time he worked closely with teachers and support staff: passing on ideas, developing their skills, introducing background theory and giving them the confidence to work on their own ideas. Keith's work, which focused on developing engagement and communication through rhythm and call- and-response, is now a fundamental part of the school's approach to teaching and learning.

So how does Keith inspire school staff and make such an impact on their thinking and practice? Keith led a 30-minute session with five classes gathered in the school hall to demonstrate some aspects of their work together. As the children and adults entered the hall there was a feeling of expectation that something exciting was going to happen. All the classes had worked with Keith, so were aware of the format. The audience sat in a semi circle with a space between them and Keith, who sat waiting quietly on a wooden plinth.

Before the session Keith appeared quiet and unassuming, so it was very surprising to witness how much noise he was capable of making, as he launched into his first cal-l and- response activity. He used his version of 'Don't put mustard on the custard', a popular poem by Michael Rosen, choosing children at random, asking their names, and then making up a rhyme about them. This had the adults roaring with laughter, and this affected the children, who were eagerly waiting their turn to be Keith's next 'victim'. Keith used his whole body to project his personality into the audience, including banging his hands on the wooden plinth and stamping his feet, and using sign and exaggerated gesture.

Keith showed great skill in responding to the audience as a whole and to individuals within the group. The adults were also skilled at interpreting what

the children were feeling, as well as when and how they might want to be involved. Keith used call- and- response, with a fast, loud and infectious beat. His version of Shel Silverstein's 'Spaghetti, Spaghetti' ("Spaghetti, spaghetti/All over the place/Up to my elbows/All over my face!") with everyone throwing up their hands at the end, and shouting "Mama Mia!" with seriously bad Italian accents, kept the children and adults laughing and clapping, and made the atmosphere even more raucous.

'The Well of Truth' followed. This concerns a pie that is left out to cool, only to be stolen by a mystery thief. A child is chosen to come and sit next to Keith, and deny they ate the pie. Keith shouts," Who ate the pie? Did you Ashraf eat the pie?"
The audience respond by chanting, " I did not eat that pie/I did not tell a lie/I'll jump across the well/Heyla Hopa/Oi! Oi! Oi!"

This was a vibrant, hilarious session, with children and adults engaged, enjoying themselves and sharing in a fun atmosphere, which was created by one man sitting on a wooden plinth. This is quite remarkable when we consider that most of the children have severe or profound learning difficulties, and all have significant communication needs. What Keith had also created were opportunities for children and adults to communicate with each other. Though the session looked spontaneous, Keith explained that it was made possible by his working closely with the staff. They knew what to expect, and were quick to participate: encouraging the children to maintain concentration, and responding with genuine delight to the children's efforts and participation.

So how do we describe Keith's work, and what is the thinking behind his methods? Is it drama, poetry, literacy, or just having fun? Keith is emphatic: "It's not really drama-it's communication. What we are trying to do is to help the children reach the proto declarative point." Proto declarative point? This needs some explaining.
"Typically around nine months of age, children start to point at things. Not because they want them (they have been doing this for some time) but because what they see is of interest and they want to share their interest with whoever is with them. They will point, and often make a vocal sound. Adults interpret this as meaning, "I see that thing. Say something about it. Tell me something about it. Tell me what it is called. Even though I know what it is, I want to hear you tell me again."

This fundamental process of 'triangulation': between the child, an object and another person, is vital for early language development, and can only really happen if the child is at the stage where he aware of his surroundings, can share attention, and wants to communicate about something that is interesting to him. Researchers into mother/child communication such as Colwyn Trevarthen and Elizabeth Bates, and writers such as Juliet Goldbart, working with children with severe learning needs, see this as one of the most crucial stages in the development of communication.

“Many children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, or severe learning difficulties, can point, but they will only do it as an *imperative*: “Give me that!”. What we are doing in this work is unraveling and developing the preceding skills that culminate in the *declarative* point, where the child is communicating, “That’s interesting, so let’s talk about it.” This is the basis of narrative language, as opposed to “Give me! Get me! I want!”

All of Keith’s circle-based poetry and stories involves children and adults working towards what Juliet Goldbart of Manchester Metropolitan University, referred to as “the single most important quantum leap in early development: the proto-declarative point.” You could say that this is the whole point of Keith’s work (pun intended).

Keith likens his work to ‘Motherese’, the term coined to describe early interactions between mothers and their babies. Here the mother typically picks up the infant and talks “a load of highly rhythmical rubbish”, as Keith puts it, and then stops and waits for the baby to reply. The baby says nothing so mum continues as if there has been a response. She may be responding to a flicker, a movement of the head, eye contact, or anything that might signal, “Do it again!” In the same way, the staff in our activity were ‘in tune’ with the children, and were watching for a flicker or a laugh. Then they might say to Keith, ”What about Jonathan? He likes that. Can he have a turn?”

Keith’s call and response activities, as well as work he does using Shakespeare, is based on a four-beat exchange, ending with a ‘cap line’. This was used in the ‘Well of Truth’, culminating in “Heyla! Hopa! Oi! Oi! Oi!”. This rhythm is similar to that found in ‘Motherese’ and in simple interactive action games such as ‘Round and round the garden like a teddy bear’ and also in circle rhymes such as ‘Ring a ring of roses’, where “Atishoo! Atishoo!” Is the cap line.

“If you want to analyze what we do further,” explained Keith, “you could say that the ‘deep structure’ of what we are doing is a communicative activity, but the ‘surface structure’ is the narrative itself. So we are not ‘doing Shakespeare’ but *using* Shakespeare, or the Bible, or Homer, to share and develop communication.” This is an important distinction, and a valuable observation for teachers in special schools, who often struggle with the expectation that they should provide pupils who are pre-verbal with ‘Literacy’ activities, when what is really needed is work on communication.

Keith described how he worked with a teacher with this dilemma, when an inspector wanted to see a literacy activity involving students with profound learning needs, including those with profound hearing and visual impairment. Keith worked with the teacher to develop a multisensory activity based on Genesis 39:45: the story of Joseph. This involved one of the students lying on a large yellow fake fur rug, (desert sand) responding to fibreoptic lights dangled above her, (stars in the night sky) while her class-mates used ‘Big Mack’ communication aids with recordings of desert sound effects such as goat bells, camels etc. The inspector was satisfied that he had witnessed a

literacy activity; while the teacher was satisfied that she had shared communication at a deep level with her class.

Another group of teachers working with Keith, at Watergate School in Lewisham, were encouraged to use a National Curriculum topic to develop communication. They were focusing on 'temperature and climate' so Keith suggested they develop interactive activities based on BBC Radio's 'Shipping Forecast'. They turned it into an interactive game using a parachute. "Once you have witnessed something like this, Charlotte Green reading "Dogger/Fisher/ German Bight" etc will never seem the same again!"

Keith has involved pupils in visits to the Globe Theatre, using Shakespeare as a medium for developing communication. One group of students he works with, with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, took it upon themselves to learn the entire scripts for all of the seven workshops Keith led onstage at the Globe. "Whenever we are together they lead the workshop, and I join in. Collectively we are helping the youngsters manage and facilitate a group workshop using their own script, based on Peter Pan."

Keith is particularly pleased that the achievements of some of the children and young people he works with have gained national recognition. One group, who had been working on Shakespeare's 'Twelfth Night', performed in front of a gala BAFTA dinner. One youngster received rapturous applause as he involved the 400 guests in a call and response that included Shakespearean taunts, jibes and profanities, culminating in' "Oh yeah. Right. In your dreams pal!"

PJ Pilcher, a 14- year- old from Charlton Special School, worked with Keith and other students on a performance of Romeo and Juliet at the National Theatre. The audience included the Minister for Culture, and the Education Officer for the Richmond Theatre. They were so impressed that PJ was invited to develop a series of performances for the Richmond Theatre. He subsequently received a Diana Award for 'leadership and inspiration in drama and creative arts.'

Keith has also worked with groups at Westminster Abbey, The House of Commons and St Paul's Cathedral. Japanese tourists were bemused by the students' rendition of the Bible in Cockney rhyming slang ("Adam and Eve/'ad it made/Lovely garden/Nice bit of shade. /But they didn't/ Adam and Eve it /When God said "Oi! /Apple. Leave it!"

What is the legacy of Keith's work? At Stephen Hawking School, for example, you are likely to see maths lessons using rhythm and call and response. Teachers have also developed routines of their own, including using rhythmic chants such as 'Going on a bear hunt', where the class move around a large kettle drum, moving in a circle around the drum, chanting and taking turns to hit the drum with their hands. Is this 'Literacy', or is it communication? Does it matter, as we know that there is a point to what we are doing?

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Books by Keith Park

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