

PROJECT I: STUDENT INSIGHT

Project Aim: To provide PSHE Mental Health and Well-being drama presentations to local schools.

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Background and SDG Goals:



The idea for Student Insight was sparked at the GSL Catalyst day, where we wanted to spread a core message about teenage mental health and positive interactions. We felt that the best PSHE sessions we had received at school had been given by Loudmouth Theatre, who had given important messages using devised drama pieces.



Essentially, we wanted to mimic the concept but felt that we could offer a unique approach by being closer in age to our audience and thus convey the material in a way that they could relate to more. It would also be **free** in contrast to the professional companies, some of whom charge more than £1,000 per performance.

Planning

We got off to a good start, when we got in touch with the Shropshire Council Young People's Team, who were very keen to help us and facilitate getting in touch with schools. Renee Lee, the TaMHS Training Support and Development Officer, met us and discussed our plan. She was very positive and optimistic about the need for such a project in Shropshire, as funding had been dramatically cut.

One of the recurring issues we saw in our school lives was that people did not communicate with each other honestly about how they were feeling. We researched different workshops and charities who shared our vision for a greater emphasis on communication between teenagers and to our surprise there weren't many offering the same messages. There were huge networks of support groups and different resources geared at teenagers who were having problems at school, with issues such as bullying, identity, belonging and discrimination, but from what we found there was no one putting forward the same ideas about the crucial nature about positive interaction between students in the same way we wanted to.

“Funding had been dramatically cut”

Writing the Play

The hardest thing we found with our project was the writing process. An issue we found was trying to balance the need for a coherent plot for the audience to follow and trying to include events or scenarios that underlined the need and benefits of communication. This meant effectively writing the script back to front, as we knew what we were trying to say but just not how to say it, and it

was very much a case of figuring out how we were going to get our message across as we went along. We were grateful to our school's Drama and PSHE teachers, who helped us with shaping the play.

The Plot

Our plot follows the lives of two boys, Elliot and Toby. At the start of the play we would outline the differences between



the two, their backgrounds and personalities: Toby is a far more positive person, whereas Elliot internalises his troubles and becomes more and more volatile as the play progressed. From there we introduced Sophia, who comes in halfway through and causes the two to clash. Eventually, the play ends with Sophia and Elliot resolving their issues by talking, with the latter promising to settle his differences with Toby. We felt that this ending showed how just talking to people and being honest about your issues could have the desired effect, with Toby and Elliot both having improved their lives from the beginning of the play.

One change we made quite early on based on the feedback we were given was to add in pauses in the play to talk about the issues Elliot, Toby and Sophia were facing. During these breaks, we would provide information and sources of help. This move to a hybrid workshop/play allowed us to get more of the grittier information based content we wanted to present through, whilst still maintaining the main idea of the project.

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Preparing ourselves

In order to be ready for delivering the play in schools, we all completed a Youth Mental Health First Aid course, so that we would have a greater awareness of Mental Health problems and know how to react if we met someone looking for help. We also spent a long time going through Kooth and Helios' websites, so we knew what they said.



Launch:

Once we had a finished piece, we invited all local schools to come to our school to watch the presentation and ask any questions, hoping that they would invite us to give it in their school. Initially, we were excited that 15 schools said they were interested and would come to watch the presentation.

Despite all our planning, on our 'launch day', no schools were able to send any staff. This was a major disappointment, especially considering the optimistic response we had received from our invitations and from talking to Renee. One of the best things we have learned from the project is resilience when things do not go according to plan and the perseverance to see things through – we are really passionate about the play we have created, which helped us in our determination.

Success at last:

Performing the piece was possibly one of the most rewarding experiences we have ever had. We managed to arrange a booking with a local secondary school, Mary Webb School and delivered our play to over 250 Year 8 and 9 students, finally completing a journey that had taken **250 students** over a year to complete. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with teachers and from the school commenting that they thought the production was **“very effective”** and **“thought provoking”**. The thing that hit home to us most was in the Question and Answer section, where some brave students asked some really interesting questions that showed that they had taken on board what we wanted to get across.

The Future:

With one very successful presentation behind us, we have four more schools who have asked us in to present to their pupils and look forward to developing links with individual teachers to make the process easier. We have also reshaped the Question and Answer section to aid the interaction between the audience and the cast, as we found that it took a little while for the audience to pluck up the courage to ask questions.

We are fully aware that we only have one year at school left and have already held auditions for the next cast. We are also looking into filming the play for schools outside of our community to use in PSHE lessons. This way, we hope to make Student Insight a permanent feature at Shrewsbury.

