moving stories

Learning through
Dance & Drama

Executive Summary Report

September 2025

Peoplescape theatre

TRINITY LABAN

/LEAN Lewisham Education Arts Network

phf Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Project summary

'Moving Stories' is an ambitious, large-scale project that integrates dance and drama to support communication, creativity, and personal agency among children with diverse and complex needs across six special schools. Combining innovative research with a dynamic model of continuing professional development, the project has been fully embraced by teachers and artists, demonstrating clear positive impact on pupil engagement, expression, and confidence—particularly for those involved over two academic years.

The creative approach encourages both verbal and non-verbal expression, imaginative participation, and self-directed learning. Its flexible structure allows for either integrated or distinct use of dance and drama, supporting personalised learning pathways. Teachers report an expanded pedagogical toolkit and a growing confidence, particularly in leading drama. Most teachers had some previous experience of drama whereas leading dance was less familiar. Teaching Assistants also became more actively involved, contributing to stronger team cohesion and shared leadership in creative learning.

Professional development was led by artists through a varied and responsive approach—modelling, mentoring, co-experimenting, and direct training—enabling teachers to adapt practices to their own styles and curricula. While some partners would have welcomed more off-site training and inter-school visits, the collaborative process strengthened professional networks. The involvement of a disabled artist as a critical friend was valuable, with interest expressed in deeper inclusion.

Despite logistical complexities, Moving Stories has created a strong legacy—enhanced pupil outcomes, enriched teaching practice, new resources, and a growing professional community. It offers a compelling model for embedding the arts in special education and calls for further dissemination and development.

Moving Stories was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation as part of their Teacher Development initiative.

It has been incredibly useful for me as a teacher to develop my skills and I feel ready and confident to continue the journey without artists although I would love them to come back!

This project has really reignited my joy in teaching.

The pupils have gained a lot from the sessions – confidence and creativity.

One child has severe speech sound difficulties but through dance and movement she was able to express her ideas and enjoyed being understood and part of the group.

How was Moving Stories delivered?

Moving Stories is a partnership project managed and delivered by 3 Lewisham based organizations: Lewisham Education Arts Network, Peoplescape Theatre and Trinity Laban, The Moving Stories programme employed 8 dance and drama artists to work with 12 teachers from six primary special schools and special education settings. These catered for a wide range of needs including children with autism, social, emotional and mental health needs, speech and language difficulties, and more severe learning challenges.

Within each year of the two-year project, 12 weekly sessions were delivered in triads (a dance artist, a drama artist and one teacher) with support from learning assistants, working with a total of 206 pupils. Over the two years, the format evolved from artist-led to increasingly teacher-led sessions to foster independence.

How did the programme design support teacher development?

Project resources were used to prioritise regular planning and reflection time plus off-site training for both teachers and artists. Partners shared effective examples of previous practice and these were trialled and evaluated in the classroom alongside new thinking born of the alchemy of the triads working together for the first time.

Engaging with 'a concentrated set of sessions with built in reflection time' (Teacher, Year 1) helped teachers to understand, manipulate and practice new techniques in a safe and supportive environment. Year 1 was a more 'exploratory' year in which dance and drama techniques were employed both separately and in an integrated way to meet children's specific learning needs and teachers and artists together trialled and tested approaches to find out what was most effective. Year 2 was designed to be a year more about consolidation and embedding techniques in the teacher's pedagogical toolkit. The artist's role therefore consciously shifted focus between Year 1 and two.

Everyone valued the opportunities to share their practice with each other in training sessions away from school. Teachers led their own in-school training session for colleagues about Moving Stories approaches. All have continued to plan these approaches into their day-to-day work now the project is over.

What is the Moving Stories Approach?

Generally lasting between half an hour and forty-five minutes, Moving Story sessions are creative and interactive with a strong and predictable structure and shape and very clear beginnings and endings. Sessions are dance and drama led, with activity transitioning from one art form to another following a theme. Adults and children, working together, frequently explore a problem to solve, experience a 'journey' and/or create an unfamiliar world to explore. Sessions are frequently supported by weighted sensory props, fabric and other bespoke stimuli.

Often lesson content is linked to a humanities subject, or a text being studied in Literacy. Ritual greetings and routines that encourage children to use their voices are valued, as is the use of a focused calming activity early in the session, maybe accompanied by music or chimes. Where a session begins and ends remains flexible and can be altered in the light of how the children are responding on any one day. Sessions also require a calm and reflective 'cool down' activity at their close, frequently using music and touch.

Repetition of session content from week to week, with creative developments that deepen learning, is effective and valued highly. Revisiting this familiar material gives the pupils the security of predicting what's going to happen next while also building the anticipation and excitement of a possible surprise.

A couple of schools appreciated there being a product/sharing goal as the culmination of a series of sessions, with something to rehearse which builds from week to week, and optional research elements fulfilled by an off-site visit.

It is important to note that there are many variables that affect session content: children's capacities, learning needs and behaviour; the culture and planned curriculum of the school; both artists' previous professional practice and experience; the interest skills and confidence of the teacher; the creativity of the process. Some artists worked in more than one school which encouraged cross-fertilization of ideas. Two of the six schools are disapplied from the National Curriculum.

The model which evolved over Year 1 of the project is a more integrated model than was envisaged at the project's inception. Year 2 of the project allowed for more diversification of approach and more work in individual art forms.

What was the change we wanted to see?

Project Enquiry Question

'How can using drama and dance in SEND settings develop teachers' pedagogical practice and support the strategic embedding of this practice in whole school planning?'

Desired Project Outcomes

- Project teachers will have developed a secure repertoire of effective dance and drama techniques and strategies that they are excited to embed in their work in SEND settings.
- Creatively engaged, pupils will have grown in confidence while developing their verbal and non-verbal communication and expressive skills.
- Participating artists will have deepened and extended their professional practice through working with more than one art form and collaborating with specialist teachers in SEND settings.
- The most effective training approaches that helped realize these aspirations will have been identified.

What did teachers gain from Moving Stories?

- Ability to identify which dance and drama techniques are most effective with their pupils
- Opportunities to manipulate, practice and understand these techniques & embed them in their planning
- Opportunities to reflect and share practice with others, within and beyond their school
- A strengthening of the creative culture of their classroom/ teaching team
- A broadening of their expectations of pupils & adjustment of their perspectives on success.

'Good to see support staff getting more involved. Some adapted to this more readily. It's been positive for the team. However, because all staff could see the joy and progression made by some individuals and this really helps for team wellbeing.'

'I regularly use elements of Moving Stories sessions without there being artists in the room, for example in PE/ dance/Chinese New Year etc but don't explicitly call it Moving Stories.'

What teachers valued about 'Moving Stories' practice

- Moving Stories has a strong, predictable structure and identity.
- Ritual greetings and opening routines encourage children to use their voices, sometimes with the additional use of a focusing and calming activity, maybe accompanied by music or chimes.
- Where a session begins and ends remains flexible and can be altered in the light of how the children are responding on any one day.
- Sessions require a calm and reflective 'cool down' activity at their close, frequently using music and touch.
- Repetition of session content from week to week, with creative developments that deepen learning, is also valued highly.
- The inclusion of a rehearsed outcome that can be shared with other children/parents building in complexity from week to week was also valued by a small number of teachers.

Specific Drama elements of Moving Stories

- Teacher in Role technique working with pupils who are also in role
- The introduction of a story narrative or simple theme which can include some dramatic tension by requiring a problem to be solved or a quest to be undertaken
- The use of recorded music and live instruments to assist with focus and transitions
- The use of 'signifying' items to indicate when the leader is in role or not
- The strategic use of simple, tailored and weighted props/symbolic objects and scene-setting textiles which are tangible, sensory and frame the working space offer multi-sensory ways into the imagined experiences.
- Drama's 'gaming' techniques which helped to manage the energies in the room and can be tailored to themes being explored and skills needing development
- Verbal 'Call and Response' activity with repeating patterns.
- The use of story massage

Specific Dance elements of Moving Stories

- The use of dance language around dynamics, levels, space and time.
- Collective movement of their teaching group, moving together 'as one'
- Collaboration through pair work and small groups helping children manage proximity and touch.
- Responding physically to recorded musical stimuli and the use of live instruments to assist with focus and transitions
- Movement's value in helping pupils regulate their behaviour, by breaking up conventional, more sedentary learning
- Autonomous, strategic use of flexible props like circles made of elastic, which can be personalised for one-to-one work with children whose movement is restricted.
- Encouraging children to use space and their bodies to express themselves.
- Physical 'Call and Response' activity with repeating patterns.
- Use of textile props like long ribbons, expanse of stretchy fabric or scarves to stimulate the imaginations and encourage a particular type of movement; help define a working area; improve balance and proprioception.
- Movement provides an alternative way of responding for non-verbal children allowing increased participation

What did children gain from Moving Stories?

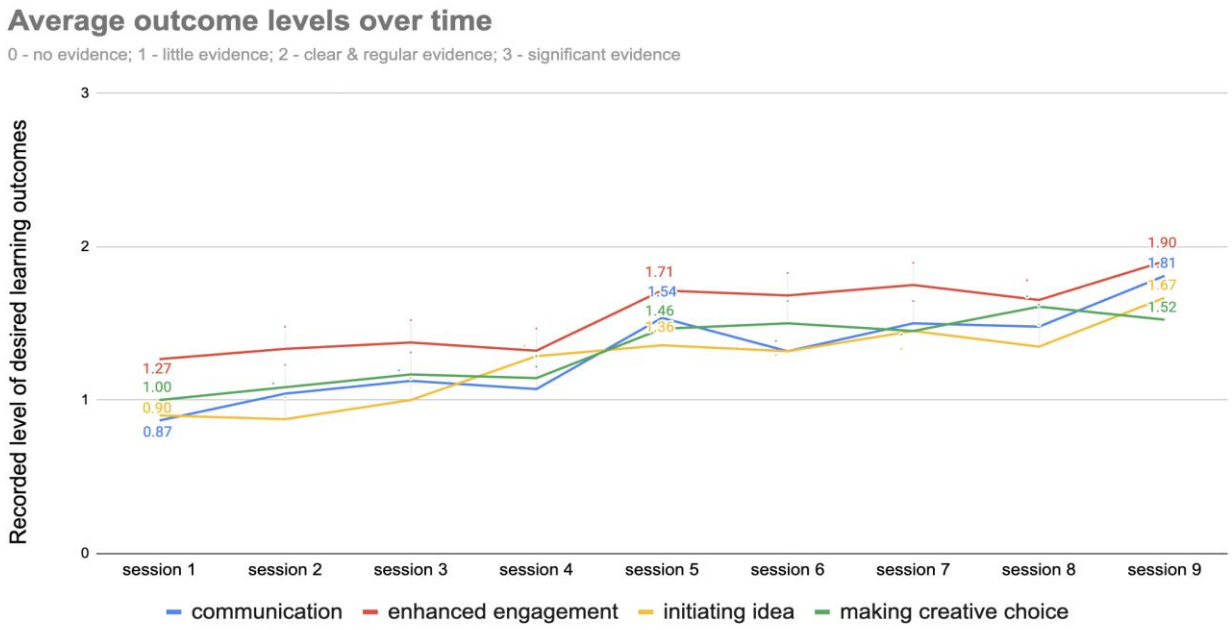
- A willingness to participate in creative activities and express how they are feeling using movement and /or voice
- Growth in confidence and self-esteem, and developing a sense of belonging
- The ability to generate ideas, reflect and sometimes bring new ideas to a session
- To enjoy the personal control and sense of agency that involvement in movement and drama offer.
- Growth in focus, concentration and persistence at tasks
- Willingness to collaborate with peers and adults and handle proximity and touch

Indicators of pupil progress

In Year 2, each triad was asked to track evidence of 4 desired learning outcomes:

- A development of verbal and non-verbal communication skills
- Increased levels of awareness and engagement
- A development of confidence to initiate ideas
- An Increased ability make creative choices

After each session the contributions of 3 selected pupils per class were allocated a score between 0-3 according to the level of evidence shown for that outcome. A steady growth in average outcome levels was observed.



87% of pupils showed at least a **1-2 level increase** in terms of showing evidence in verbal and Non-Verbal Communication, moving from little or no evidence to clear and significant evidence.

77% of pupils showed at least a 1-2 level increase in terms of showing evidence in enhanced awareness and engagement, while **13% showed a 3-level increase**

77% of pupils showed at least a 1-2 level increase in terms of showing evidence in initiating Idea/Ideas, while **19% showed 3-level increase.**

What did artists gain from Moving Stories?

- new skills, knowledge and ways of working from both fellow artists and teachers
- insights into working with children in SEND settings
- Opportunity explore and practice a variety of approaches to the professional development of teachers
- new networks and new employment opportunities

'I've really benefited from working with a dance artist and their incredible wealth of knowledge and experience of working through dance in a participatory and inclusive way. I've also really enjoyed the process of working closely with the teachers on developing their literacy curriculum.' Artist

'I feel one of the biggest learning points for me has been how to support teachers to develop their practice...I've had to think more deeply about my own practice in order to support teachers effectively - and developed a sensitivity of when to step in and offer supporting ideas and when to step back and allow teachers to take on more leadership...' Artist

'Both disciplines offer safe spaces for emotional expression, helping children understand and manage their emotions better.' Artist - Year 1

'While some sessions seem more movement based and some more drama based 'that is ok - it didn't feel one-sided - rather it provides two different languages with which to explore the various topics/themes/narratives.' Artist

Table of common training approaches used by artists

	Year 1 (Each artist has 12 sessions in school)	Year 2 (Each artist has 6 sessions in school)
Participant Observation	Teachers act as a 'participant observer' watching the artists modelling techniques they will later practice, while helping individual children access the session successfully. Artists observe each other and look for points of creative engagement between the two art forms.	Co-delivery of playful, creative sessions, especially early on in Year 2, so teachers could experience familiar techniques with their new class and observe and identify which techniques have most impact. Later artists can become participant observers in sessions led by teachers.
Modelling	Artists display a 'smorgasbord' of techniques, strategies and resources that address pupils' learning needs, the planned curriculum and teachers' appetite and interest. Resources are introduced such as musical instruments, multi-sensory props and recorded music. The 'Moving Stories' model unfolds organically.	Strategies are stripped back and refined to those core approaches that teachers are keen to master. There is an element of simplification at work. Sometimes an artist models, then teacher repeats with tweaks the following week. Teachers bring ideas to the table and the artist helps to frame these ideas in a creative form that is most accessible to the pupils.
Planning and Reflection	Artists and teachers brainstorm ideas at the beginning of a topic in a planning session. Teachers and artists engage in reflective dialogue, exploring the rationale behind the techniques. The post session conversations are key to deepening teachers understanding and offer first experiences of structuring dance and drama sessions	Artists model critically engaging with practice. Artist and teacher discuss what could have done differently, what could be adapted, how certain techniques could be embedded into the wider curriculum. Specific and carefully articulated praise is used, for example, to help the teacher recognise when they have made choices that have intuitively increased the impact of the activity or facilitated better access.
Sharing practice	Training time is focused specifically on exchange of practice between artists, between teachers and between teachers and artists. Time is used to reflect on the impact of the work for all parties, including the children. Active sharing of recent practice on cohort days is universally rated as valuable Online sessions are run for artists with a mentor and one online introductory training session is run for TAs.	Training time is focused specifically on deepening teacher understanding through exposure to more theoretical underpinning. Additional training is offered in dance, where teacher confidence is more variable. Time is used to reflect on the impact of the work for all parties. Teachers lead an in-school training session for their col leagues in school demonstrating their increased under standing The project team and artists create a Moving Stories resource pack based on proven activities and themes used in the project, with a 'bank' for music and other activity ideas

Project legacy

Moving Stories has undoubtedly required a large commitment of staff time and resources. However, the legacy of Moving Stories is strong – broadened expectations of children; stronger teaching teams; artists whose commitment to working in special schools has been reinforced; expanded teacher and artist toolkits; new schemes of work and resource banks; new documentation to illustrate the value of the work; new professional networks; new employment opportunities for artists; a new Moving Stories' Handbook; new bespoke sensory resources in school; new applications for funding to extend this work...

It's shifted my idea of what success is– In Moving Stories every idea is accepted.

'It's helped raise staff's expectations of the children - it helped the children to recall prior learning...make knowledge stick.' (Senior Leader)

Photos: Becca Hunt

Participating schools:

Athelney Resource Base – space within a primary school that has additional resources tailored to support children with an autism diagnosis

Brent Knoll special school for children with complex social, communication and interaction difficulties, including autism

Drumbeat community maintained special school and ASD service

New Woodlands special school for children with SEN including those with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties

Tidemill community primary school's specialist provision for children with speech, language and communication difficulties

Watergate special school for pupils with severe learning difficulties, complex needs and a number of children who have an additional diagnosis of autism.

All quotes are from participating class teachers unless otherwise stated. A full version of this report can be found at www.leanarts.org.uk/projects/moving-stories

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