



## partnerships for schools

This case study looks at Ralph Thoresby School's whole school community engagement, which is at the centre of its mission: 'being together for learning, striving for excellence, valuing diversity, and providing for the community'. It demonstrates how an inclusive and committed approach to cultural learning can impact on a school community.

### Key project information

**School:** Ralph Thoresby School

**Age range:** 11-18

**No. of students:** 1,019

**Location:** Suburban

**School type:** Community School

**Specialisms:** Arts (Performing, Visual and Media)

**Free school meals:** 21 per cent

**Ofsted:** Satisfactory and Improving, Summer 2008

**Local authority:** Leeds

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### Background

Ralph Thoresby is an average-sized secondary school to the northwest of Leeds. Most of its students are from areas of relative affluence but an increasing minority are from areas of the city that experience social and economic disadvantage. Thirty one per cent of students are from Black Ethnic Minorities (BME) and 1.8 per cent of students are looked after, almost twice the average for secondary schools.

A lower than average proportion of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities but a high proportion of students have a statement of special educational needs (SEN). There is a 'care suite', including a hydrotherapy pool, on site catering for 30 young people with physical disabilities and visual impairments. All SEN pupils are integrated with peers, providing opportunities for the development of personal development skills for the whole school community. As Brian Wilson, Director of Arts, describes, "there is no division of identity."

Ralph Thoresby School's core ethos has created a whole school community through developing and promoting inclusive creative learning opportunities. It does so in a safe and secure environment and is located in a city which has invested in culture, providing the right environment in which to deliver good teaching and learning practice.

### Project description

The arts are used to celebrate young people's successes and to give students a way of expressing themselves and exploring their identities. A disabled sixth form pupil has just completed a film celebrating positive images of her visually impaired friend's life. The school supported her to develop her creative idea and source funding through the Grierson Trust by providing professional film editors and mentors. The film explored the two friends' sense of identity, relationships and ideas through a documentary and was nominated as an entry for a Grierson Award at The Royal Institute, London, in September 2009.

The school moved to a new building in April 2009 and this provided an opportunity to rethink its inclusive practice and to review and develop every aspect of its functions.

Headteacher, Stuart Hemingway, said of the decision to review: "We want to see high quality of delivery in the classroom today and an even higher delivery tomorrow. We want to see smarter working, better learning and high level performances across the school and community."

The new space prompted a significant investment into workforce reform in general and leadership roles in middle management in particular. As a result middle managers have developed activities,

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experiences and collaborations between the diverse communities that Ralph Thoresby increasingly represents. This has led to an increase in cultural activity, particularly through programmes focused on community cohesion. Ralph Thoresby's extended services are well developed and cultural learning is perceived to have a positive impact on social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL).

## Cultural learning

The school's focus on cultural learning provides opportunities for young people to explore and celebrate identity through a wide range of cultural forms such as ballet, bhangra, jazz, hip hop, other visual and lens based artforms, and intergenerational projects such as a community choir. Part of the school's success is attributed to the recognition that middle managers receive for developing this work.

The review had other benefits, including the production of an arts plan and an arts Self Evaluation Form (SEF). Provision is reviewed strategically using established assessment techniques like standardisation, reflection and data analysis. This robust approach allows the school to develop the curriculum flexibly and responsively.

For example, pupils enrolled in Media Studies responded positively to engaging with media and photography as art forms, showing versatility and ease of use with film, lens-based and digital media. As a result, the school developed a range of BTEC courses including Media. Twenty three students have completed a BTEC Level 2 Diploma in Media in the first year of running the course, and there is an encouraging uptake for post-16 recruitment.

The school has taken a strategic approach to developing cultural support services as part of its community plan for specialist status and in-depth support to a cluster of eight partner primary schools is provided. The arts SEF model is adopted across the cluster, and ensures that co-enquiry with partners and a regular review of cultural engagement is undertaken. Each school is supported by Ralph Thoresby to identify and then address any weaknesses relating to culture. Where culture is not identified or prioritised in a SEF, individual and cluster support programmes are developed. These include guided curriculum change and change management programmes, sometimes delivered through whole day INSET.

This support aims to facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of culture. Ongoing development work with Cookridge primary school is a good example of this community cluster practice. Stuart Tomlinson, Headteacher at Cookridge Primary, said: "The regular meetings for the arts staff have created a forum for sharing ideas and resources. We have been supported very well by Ralph Thoresby School with access to creative professionals, equipment and expertise. This has helped us to create 'an exciting and vibrant curriculum' (Ofsted May 2009) and achieve Artsmark<sup>1</sup> standards".

The new Key Stage 3 curriculum promotes personalised learning. From Year 11 onwards students can take on leadership roles working as leaders in their own learning. Youth-led activities in dance, drama and sports are particularly successful with 120 young sports leaders recorded.

The school has developed a student parliament to engage the student body in decision-making and raise awareness of political processes. The 2009 school musical was directed by a sixth form pupil who received awards for the project at The Wharfedale Festival of Theatre.

The school actively engages in a diverse variety of cultural opportunities and celebratory festivals. Students are inspired through planned, regular enrichment days where traditional lessons are replaced by cultural and creative experiences. Many of the city's creative professionals and cultural groups are invited to contribute to these sessions as well as to ongoing curriculum delivery. Schemes of work at Ralph Thoresby include input from many partnerships with the cultural sector.

This inclusive approach to cultural learning has been supported and developed in partnership with Artforms, a service provided by Education Leeds (a not-for-profit company formed in April 2001 and wholly owned by Leeds City Council). Artforms offers advice, support and advocacy for arts education, including curriculum planning and the development and delivery of effective learning projects and programmes. It is the city's leading music and arts initiative.

This partnership is perceived to be critical to Ralph Thoresby's success and particularly to their inclusion and cultural learning agendas. Artforms acts as a facilitator and broker to

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ensure young people in the city have an entitlement to a rich and exciting range of arts and cultural experiences. This partnership builds on historical investment in cultural development for Leeds by leading arts education organisation Cape UK<sup>2</sup>, which has led to teachers, educationalists, schools, local authorities and researchers creating a critical mass of thinking on culture and cultural learning.



## An inclusive project

'Talking Dance' was part of Northern Ballet Theatre's (NBT) two-year research programme into making dance accessible for people with visual impairments. These findings have been documented in a DVD.

For 'Talking Dance', NBT worked with Ralph Thoresby School's dance department, the school's resource for visually impaired students, and a community partner - OPAL (Older People's Action in the Community). The aim of the project was to engage participants from different age groups and with different ranges of visual impairment with dance, and to investigate effective communication between dance performers and their audiences.

The mixed group, consisting of both sighted and visually impaired people, worked together to explore their responses to music using creative movement. They took part in three half-day taster sessions, followed by three full-day workshops. They worked with a team of artists from NBT to produce exciting dance pieces and to find imaginative ways to describe their work through sound and the other senses.

Visually impaired audiences engaged with and enjoyed the resulting performance. The project was filmed and edited by some of the participants, led by filmmaker Will Docherty. The final DVD of the project was also developed to be accessible to people with

visual impairments. A visually impaired student who took part in the project said: "I don't want people to pity me, I want them to see what I have achieved."

This project epitomises the school's vision to place creativity and creative thinking at the heart of its culture. All pupils are encouraged to become resilient learners, not afraid to take risks. Young people develop their confidence and enrich their communication skills through the arts. The participants in this project developed a sense of fulfilment, advancing their social and personal skills. These partnerships are still continued to date and a positive relationship has been nurtured with OPAL on an ongoing basis. A Year 11 student said of his experience: "Older people have so much to share and we learn a lot from them."

## Key lessons learned and conditions for success

- Open access to cultural experiences and subsequent shared learning are a profoundly enriching experience that aids the progression of all young learners. Do not underestimate the potential of your SEN pupils. Have ambitious teaching and learning goals as part of individual learning plans and adapt support to suit the needs of your learners.
- Advancing cultural learning through cluster work is interdependent on cluster schools buying into cultural learning and often requires Senior Leadership Team (SLT) intervention.
- Try to remain agile so that you can respond and anticipate the future needs of your learners. Generate the freedom and take calculated risks to adapt courses to meet interest and demand.
- A cultural learning ethos and programme is supported because the SLT understand the value of it. The school is also located in a city which invests in cultural development. This internal and external environment is conducive to Ralph Thoresby's success in cultural learning.

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## Key contact

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## References

1. Artsmark is a national award scheme that recognises schools with a high level of provision in the arts.
2. CapeUK specialises in creativity through research based project work, consultancy and professional development <http://www.capeuk.org/arts>.