



**The Linking
Network**

ACTIVITIES AND TOP TIPS

MAINSTREAM

AND

SPECIAL SCHOOL

LINKING

**ANNICE AVEY
SOPHIE HAMMOND**

2021



OUR STORY

We both have a background in education in mainstream and special needs settings. When we were given the opportunity to link both kinds of schools together, we knew that we had to create a club with what we were most passionate about. We decided that we were going to base the club around performing arts, where the students could meet once a week and work on a cabaret style show including many numbers from different musicals. When we first started the club, we knew it was a risk that nobody had endured in either school. Although initially we felt nervous to see how the students would react together, we were completely blown away by the instant connections and bonds between the two schools. The first session we had together, we played lots of 'getting to know you' games, 'snack time chats', dancing and singing to popular songs from musicals but mainly allowing the students to 'mingle' and talk to one another. It was a success. After our first session, we reflected on what we enjoyed and what we could do next time, and by listening to the students, we incorporated their ideas to ensure they felt they had a say in what we did. As the weeks went by, relationships were growing stronger, performance numbers were looking rehearsed and everybody seemed to be having fun. The students became more confident with each other and their abilities in the club.

When we performed our first show together, the comments we received were mainly, "look at how well they worked together". The reality was, we taught them the performance numbers and the students were the ones who created those friendships which were then reflected on stage.

We were often asked, "How did you do it?". The answer is we gave the students the opportunity to learn together, breaking down barriers of students feeling as though they couldn't do something because of their disability. We also allowed them the time to become friends and build a safe environment for them to explore, create and thrive off each other.

The response to the club and the shows since starting in 2018 has been overwhelmingly positive and encouraging. We highly recommend creating these links between mainstream and special schools to promote the inclusion of all students.

OUR TOP TIPS

- Have a bank of activities planned before each session. This will allow you to know what you will be doing and whether you need to change anything. Be flexible with this. It doesn't matter if you don't do everything that you originally planned in 1 session, do it next time.
- Encourage support staff to help with the sessions. Try and have the same support staff each session as children benefit more from seeing and working with a familiar face.
- Propose your ideas to the Headteachers of the schools. It is good to have them on board as they will help promote your club.
- Allow the first session to be a time for the students to get to know one another. This will encourage friendships to develop which will allow them to grow with confidence.
- Give students undirected time in every session. This could be in the break time or in group activities, as it allows the students to work together without being forced. This creates natural bonds within the group.
- Be inclusive. Sometimes less is more, but this doesn't mean lower your expectations. We found that when teaching a dance routine to all students, some of the basic movements were the most effective. This was because all students could access the choreography. You may want to stretch and challenge individuals within the activity, but not at the expense of other students. The key is to differentiate effectively.
- Visit each others schools and have a clearer understanding of the needs of all students who will be involved in the club.
- Have a coffee and an information gathering session with the two leaders from each school. This is an effective way to share information, knowledge and ideas for the

sessions you will be leading. This is also a great time to gain a clearer understanding on the students who will be attending the sessions. For example, behaviour needs, care plans, manual handling, language and communication strategies etc. The meet up is an opportunity for both leaders to create a vision and partnership.

- Share a social story with either/both groups of children before the initial meet up. The story would state what is going to happen. For example: Today we are going to a different school. We are meeting some children. They are going to be your new friends. We will play some games and get to know each other. We will have some snack. Then we will come back to school. We will see them again soon.
- Basic Makaton sign. This is a strategy to be used by both leaders as it will help support students with understanding language and information. It would be useful for the mainstream leader to learn some key signs, for example, yes, no, help, toilet, stop etc.
- As our club was an after school club, we needed to know how to select students. We decided to invite a certain number (10 from each school) of students who we thought would be interested. This gave us time to understand how the sessions were going to run and what activities were effective with different abilities. When we found that the club was successful, we were more confident to open the doors to more students. By the following year, we had a total of 45+ students attending the club.
- Communication with parents. Whilst running the club, we were regularly in contact with the students parents as we needed consent for students to stay 2 hours after school to attend the club, transport for students who would normally go home on school transport, trip consent, photograph and video consent, information regarding our shows etc. The communication with parents also meant that we had a very solid support network which was extremely encouraging for both the leaders and the students.
- If your club is going to be held throughout the school day, we would advise that the mainstream students travelling to the special school. This helps with transitioning and lowers the anxiety for the special needs students. It is also important for special needs students to have appropriate facilities available, for example, hoists, changing beds etc.

- Allow time. This is really important for students to process any information given to them within the session. It may take a student over a minute to answer a question or to process an instruction. It may take a student 4 weeks to take part in an activity. A child might do something one week, but not the next. Try not to rush anything, as this will allow the students to grow and develop together in their own time.
- Have fun! Praise the students and celebrate their successes. Try not to focus on the negatives of their learning and communicating. Speaking to the students with a positive tone and encouraging comments will build their confidence and self esteem. Laugh with the students and don't take yourselves too seriously. You want everyone to have this time to enjoy each others company and to learn about difference in a positive way.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

The first few sessions are all about students and staff getting to know one another. This is an important part of the journey you are about to set foot on and is vital for beginning to create meaningful relationships.

Here are some ideas of 'getting to know you' activities.

NAME AND GESTURE GAME

Students sit or stand in a circle and take it in turns to say their name. When everyone has had a turn repeat this activity, but this time students say their name with a gesture of their choice. For example: "Emma" *performs a star jump*.

NAME AND FACT GAME

Students sit or stand in a circle and take it in turns to say their name and a fact about themselves. For example: "Nazim. I love dogs."

QUESTION GAME

Students sit or stand in a circle. The leader of the session asks a simple question, which is accessible for all abilities. For example: "What is your favourite colour?" Students take it in turns to answer the question. Once everybody has answered the question a student could choose a question to ask the group. Ask as many questions as feels appropriate.

PARTNER GAME

Students are put in pairs and are given 2 minutes to find some interesting facts about each other. When the 2 minutes are up, everybody gathers around in a circle with partners sitting together. The leader of the session speaks to each pair in turn, asking them to say one fact about each other. For example: Laura: "This is Stephen and he likes playing the bass guitar." Stephen: "This is Laura. She has been on a safari in Africa."

SNACK TIME CHAT

This activity is simple yet effective. It is a time where students are free to interact with each other, without any adult direction. Students are encouraged to talk to people they do not know. This is a great way for students to build friendships and connections within the group. You might want to put a low level of music on for background noise and provide yummy treats and drinks. This ensures students feel relaxed and safe in their environment. It is also a good opportunity for you to observe or join in with the conversations.

PERFORMING ARTS

DANCE WARM UP

Put on familiar songs, whilst the leader of the group performs a warm up, which students copy. If you don't feel confident to lead a warm up yourself, ask a student to lead it or find a simple video on YouTube that everyone will be able to follow.

Examples or warm up exercises could include:

- Rolling shoulders forwards/backwards.
- Stretching the body.
- Jogging on the spot.
- Jumping.
- Grapevine, with a clap.
- Gallop left and right.
- High kicks.
- Turns.

CORNER WORK

Students stand in one corner of the room and group themselves in 2s or 3s. The leader performs a move (see above for ideas of moves) that students must repeat whilst travelling to the opposite corner of the room. Students travel group by group until all groups are in the opposite corner. The leader then performs a new move and students repeat this move, whilst travelling back to the original corner. This activity can be repeated as many times as appropriate, with different moves.

VOCAL WARM UP

This activity is a great way for students to explore different sounds with their voices. Firstly, everybody needs to be in a circle in a standing position (seated is fine for those who can not stand). Make sure that everybody is standing correctly, feet hip width apart, arms by their side, shoulders relaxed and head up right. Next, do some voice exercises to get the vocal chords warm. Here are some examples:

- Breathing in for 4 counts and breathing out on an 'Aaa' sound (you can change the out-breath sound to an Eee, Ooo, Zzz).
- Breathing in for 4 counts and making a siren noise until there is no breath.
- Working through a scale saying Me, May, Mah, Mo, Moo. You can find piano scales on YouTube to help you with this.
- Tongue Twisters.
 - Red lorry, yellow lorry.
 - Unique New York.
 - The teeth, the lips, the tip of the tongue.
 - A proper cup of coffee from a proper copper coffee pot.
 - If Stu chews shoes, should Stu choose the shoes he chews?
- Pretending to chew on a small piece of bubble gum then pretending it gets bigger. This works the jaw muscles.

LEARN A SONG

Leaders of the session need to learn the song in advance. (Students can help to choose the song they want to learn, by giving ideas.) When teaching a song, it is important that students listen to the song numerous times before beginning to learn it. This could be within the session, or a task set for home. It is useful to print off lyrics for students and supporting adults. Always print a few pages of lyrics on a coloured background to support some students with their needs. The leader needs to sing the song, line at a time, and get students to repeat it. When the first verse of the song has been taught, sing all lines together before moving on to the next verse / chorus. Continue this process for the whole song. You may need to repeat sections many times before students feel they can sing it confidently. When the song is learnt, you could add some solo lines or duets to give students an opportunity to shine. You could also teach some movement or Makaton to go alongside it. (See below)

LEARN A DANCE

Leaders of the session need to learn a simple dance routine to a popular/familiar song. (Ideally one that students enjoy listening to. Ask them to help with selecting a song.) The routine would then be taught to the group step by step. To start with we advise simple movements, as this will build students' confidence. The routine needs to be broken down into short chunks, so that all students can access the routine at a slow pace. Each section may need to be rehearsed multiple times before moving on to the next segment. At first, teach the movements slowly, without the music. When students feel confident with that section, try it at normal speed, then perform it to the music. Repeat this process until the routine is complete. Students can input ideas of movements if appropriate. Address any misconceptions as you teach the dance. It might take weeks or months to learn a routine, but high energy, positivity and perseverance will result in a successful choreographed piece, inclusive for everyone.

If you need ideas of movements for your routines, look on YouTube and adapt where necessary to suit all abilities.

LEARN MAKATON TO A SONG

Makaton is the process of using specific gestures alongside speech, to enable people to communicate more effectively. It supports with the understanding of words. A lot of students with SEN (Special Educational Needs) use Makaton on a daily basis to support their communication.

Learning Makaton signs to a song is something all students would be able to access and is a great skill to develop and to encourage communication within the group.

On YouTube there are a number of popular songs with Makaton signing. If you search for 'Singing Hands' there are two ladies who cover popular songs and sign along to the key words. This is a good way to learn some Makaton and SEN students will potentially already be familiar with this.

Teach this in the same way as you would teach a song. (See above.)

INDIVIDUAL GROUP PERFORMANCE WORK

This is a great activity for students to take responsibility for their own ideas. This could include a song, acting piece or dance. Allow time for students to come up with their own ideas in groups. Give them an idea pack, including: large sheets of paper, pens, school iPads/laptops. Let them research or discuss what they would like to perform and then share ideas. For students who want to do an acting piece, you could give each group a theme. For example: bullying, love, friendships, family, adventure. Students could perform a song/dance of their choice or make up their own song/dance. This devising activity could last a number of weeks. Students would then be asked to perform their piece in front of their peers. Encourage props and costumes in this task.

DRAMA GAMES

Splat: This is a great game to get warmed up and to have some interactive fun.

The group stand in a circle, with the adult in the middle of the circle. The adult pretends to throw a pie at one person in the circle, whilst saying "SPLAT". The person who gets 'hit' by the pie has to duck down and stay ducked down for a few seconds. (If this person forgets to duck, they are out of the game and sit down.) The people on either side of the person who has ducked down, throw an imaginary pie at each other and both shout "SPLAT". The first person to shout splat and throw the pie is the winner and stays in the game. The last person to do this is out of the game and sits down. The person who ducked now stands back up and the game continues. Repeat this process until there are only 2 people left in the game. You can go as quickly or as slowly as you like, depending on how confident the children are.

When there are only two people left, they stand in the centre of the circle, back to back. The adult chooses a category, for example: animals. Every time the adult says an animal, the two people take one step forward, away from each other. When the adult says something that is not an animal, they have to turn around and SPLAT each other. The first person to SPLAT wins the game.

You can change the game slightly, by asking a student to do the job in the centre. You can also change the category to anything you like in the final round.

Park Bench: A simple improvisation game, which develops characterisation.

Put two chairs together to make a 'park bench'. Explain to the children that it is a bench in a park and they are going to pretend to be different people that would be found in a park. Start by asking somebody to think of a character (old person, homeless person, toddler, police, baker, alien, office worker etc.). Choose somebody who has a character in mind to sit on one of the chairs, pretending to be their character. Then, when appropriate ask another person, with a character in mind, to walk into the scene, as their character. The two characters need to interact with one another and improvise a short scene. The first person then leaves the bench and the second person waits for a new character to arrive at the bench. They interact and perform a short scene. This process continues until everybody has had a turn or for as long as you would like to make it.

Try and challenge the children to make their character over-exaggerated. You could also add a third chair to the bench so you could add in a third character to the scene. You could pair children up if they do not feel confident enough to join the scene on their own.

For more ideas of drama games go on to the website: www.dramaresource.com

MUSIC

Call and response: The leader of the group uses their voice to perform a rhythm. The rest of the group then copy exactly what the leader performed. The leader then performs the same line again, but with a different tone, pitch, tempo or volume. Everybody repeats exactly how the leader performed the phrase. The leader then continues with a different phrase, which everyone else then copies. Once everyone feels comfortable with this, you could ask a student to be the leader of the group and everyone copies them. You could also use drums/other instruments to drum the beat, or for anyone who struggles with speech.

For example:

Leader (quietly): I like apple pie. Everyone else (quietly): I like apple pie.

Leader (angrily): I like apple pie. Everyone else (angrily): I like apple pie.

Leader (quickly): I like apple pie. Everyone else (quickly): I like apple pie.

Make musical shakers: Collect plastic bottles - different sized ones are fine. Allow students to decorate their bottles with stickers, glitter, paint, tissue paper, marker pens etc. When decorated, students to partly fill their bottles with: rice, pasta, lentils, dried chickpeas, couscous, dried beans etc. Students to use their sensory shakers during music sessions, to shake to the beat of songs etc. Can also be used in call and response sessions. (See above.)

Create rhythms: Leader to use a drum or instrument to make a short rhythm. Everyone to have an instrument and to copy the beat. The leader can make the beat as simple or complicated as appropriate. Try different volumes and speeds. Change the leader, to give children the chance of feeling empowered.

GROUP SHABANG AND PARACHUTE ACTIVITIES

Shabang: Check if the special school involved in the linking process have the 'Shabang' songs already purchased. If they do, wonderful. If not, you can purchase them on the 'Shabang' website: www.shabang.org.uk . You will need a large, stretchy, elastic band for this activity, which you can buy on the 'Jabadao' website: www.jabadao.org . You will also need a parachute, large enough for everyone to hold on.

The songs you purchase from the 'Shabang' website explain what you need to do throughout each song and are quite self explanatory. Favourite songs of ours are: 'Yes please', 'The Hello Song', 'Pulling on the anchor rope' and 'Whoosh went the wind'.

Parachute games:

Fruit Salad: Children need to stand in a circle with the parachute in their hands. The leader chooses 4 names of fruits and goes around the circle, giving each child a fruit name. For example: apple, pear, strawberry, orange, apple, pear, strawberry, orange... and so on. When every child has been assigned a fruit, everybody starts shaking the parachute. The leader calls out one of the fruits, everybody lifts up the parachute slowly and the children who were assigned that fruit, run under the parachute and swap places with someone of the same fruit. Repeat the activity using all the fruit names as many times as you like.

You can adapt this activity, by changing the category, for example: Animals, vegetables, colours etc.

Ball Escape: Get all children to hold onto the parachute. Then, walk around the parachute, giving children letters A, B, A, B until you have two equal teams - Team A and Team B. Pour some ball pool balls into the middle of the parachute. Both teams shake the parachute. Team A are trying to keep the balls on the parachute and Team B are trying to bounce the balls off the parachute. Set a timer for a minute and the team with the most balls on/off the parachute are the winning team.

Cat and Mouse: Choose 3 students to be mice and 1 student to be the cat. Everybody else sits down and holds on to the parachute, shaking it up and down. The mice crawl around underneath the parachute, trying to keep hidden from the cat. The cat crawls around on top of the parachute, trying to hunt the mice. The children shaking the parachute have to try and disguise where the mice are, so the cat cannot catch them. When a mouse is caught, they must join the circle with the rest of their peers. This game finishes when all mice are caught.

More parachute games can be found online. Two good websites are:
www.momjunction.com & **www.earlyimpactlearning.com** .

SPORT

OUTDOOR PLAY

Take all children outside into the playground or onto the school field and allow them time to play. You could take out PE / play equipment to encourage team building activities. Having time to play, without adult direction is vital for students to feel relaxed and to help build relationships.

SCAVENGER HUNT

Make a list of items that you will hide in an outdoor space. Put children into teams of 3/4 and allow them to choose a group name. Give each group the list of items (you could make this a visual list, by using photographs of the items) which they will tick off once found. The first group to find all items on the list is the winning team. You might want to organise a prize for the winners. This also helps with student motivation!

SCARECROW TIG

Choose 2 children to be 'Tig Masters'. Everybody else has to run around the space to avoid being tug. If someone is tug, they must stand still with their legs apart and arms out stretched, until a fellow team mate 'untigs' them by running under one of their arms. Once released from the scarecrow position, they can then run around again. You can play this game for as long as children are engaged.

OBSTACLE COURSE

Use PE equipment to make an obstacle course that children have to follow and complete in teams. Split the children into small groups. Each team will be timed completing the obstacle course. The fastest time wins. This is a great activity for teamwork.

Examples of obstacles you could include: In and out of cones. Walking across a beam. Jumping over hoops. Throwing bean bags in buckets/hoops. Crawling under something. Etc.

OTHER GAMES TO TRY:

- Rounders
- Dodgeball
- Football
- Netball
- Basketball
- Hockey
- Relay races
- Ball games
- Bowling / Skittles

ART

SENSORY EXPLORATION

Allow students to explore a range of sensory resources. This could be set up like a continuous provision session. Students freely move around the room, accessing the different activities.

Here are some ideas:

- Tray of jelly with small objects hidden in it. Children could use tweezers to pick out the objects.
- Large tray of shaving foam, with mark making tools, for students to use in the foam.
- Water play. Water tray with equipment such as: jugs, funnels, test tubes, spoons, cups, bowls, measuring spoons.
- Making slime. Recipes found on the internet or on Pinterest.
- Sand play. Making sandcastles, digging and burying items.
- Cornflour and hair conditioner. Mix these two items together to make a lovely cloud dough, that smells divine. Students enjoy this activity and find it quite therapeutic to play with the dough.

GROUP ART PROJECTS

Jigsaw: Give each child a template of a jigsaw piece. They can decorate the piece however they would like to make it their own. When everybody has completed their piece, cut them out and stick them all together to make one large jigsaw. Display this somewhere where it can be seen each time the group comes together.

Happy tree: Make a display of a tree trunk. Cut out some leaf shapes on card, which children can draw or write on. Then stick them all on the tree. You could add more as and when appropriate. You could ask students to write happy thoughts or positive moments on them from their joint sessions.

Construction tower: Put students into groups. Give each group the same amount of straws and marshmallows. Using these items, children have to build a tower. The tallest, standing tower by the end of the session wins.

Clay creatures: This is an opportunity for your students to get creative. Give each child a piece of clay and let them mould away. They can sculpt it however they like to make their own creature. It can be life-like or imaginary. An extension task could be making a habitat for the creature.

There are lots of ideas on Pinterest that you could look at including into your sessions.

GOING ON A TRIP

Something that worked really well for our students was being able to go on a trip together. Because we are mainly focussed around performing arts and putting on shows together, we thought it was a great idea to arrange a group trip to the theatre. Before we organised the trip, we asked the students to work together in small groups to think about which shows they would want to see. With the choices made by the students, it gave us a clear idea which shows we could look at booking. In the end we went to watch 'Mama Mia - The Musical'. The trip was a great way for the students to bond and create relationships away from a school environment and to have fun together. We organised for the children to meet a member of the cast after the show and asked them to prepare questions to ask the performer. This was educational and a great opportunity for our students.

You could organise a trip anywhere. Ask the students where they would like to go together on a trip, make a list of possibilities and then have a vote.

Ideas for trips:

- Bowling
- Cinema
- Theatre
- Restaurant
- Farm/Zoo

OUR LAST THOUGHTS...

We hope these activities give you some ideas when creating your special, mainstream link. As we can only give you a slight insight into our ideas and experiences, we hope you find the magical adventure that we have had the pleasure of enduring ourselves. This is an experience like no other and we will forever be grateful for the opportunities, friendships and memories it has given us.

Good luck.

Annice and Sophie