

RISE & SHINE

IMPACT ON PUPILS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Northern Ballet's Rise & Shine was piloted from September 2022 – July 2025, working with pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) in three Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) schools in Yorkshire.

Using movement, music and sensory exploration, Rise & Shine aimed to explore the impact on physical, social and emotional wellbeing, looking at the following markers:

- ★ Emotional: self-expression, agency, motivation and emotional/mood regulation
- ★ Social: communication and social relationships with the artistic team, school staff and their peers
- ★ Physical: improved and/or expanded physical vocabulary, intentional and meaningful movement, and movement tolerance.

The project crafted an arts environment entirely around the pupils' needs, preferences, and capabilities.



THE DELIVERY MODEL WAS:

Autumn Term:

Planning and preparation
Getting to know you session
In-school workshops



Summer Term:

In-school workshops
Performing at Expressions
Reflection



Spring Term:

School staff CPD
School teacher delivery with artist check ins
Visit to Northern Ballet

Dr Louise McDowall worked with the Northern Ballet team as an external evaluator to monitor the impact of the project on pupils, school staff, and the artistic and management team. You can request a copy of the full evaluative report by emailing Learning@northernballet.com

Each academic year, we worked with one class at each school and their teachers/teaching assistants and supporting staff. The artistic teams were made up of a Lead Dance Artist, Lead Music Therapist and Support Artist. We worked with Support Artists with lived experience of disability and also brought in guest artists to deliver one off sessions including wheelchair dancer Kate Stanforth.



IMPACT ON PUPILS



Emotional Regulation:
A State of Calm

Social Engagement, Communication and Interaction:
Expansion
Tolerance

Enjoyment and Happiness:
Anticipation
Excitement
Association

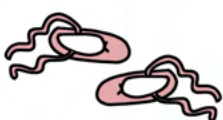
Time to Explore and Be Free:
Agency
Autonomy
Ownership

Improved Confidence, Self-Esteem and Motivation:
Trying New Things



The final report demonstrated that the carefully structured, relationally led arts practice of Rise & Shine can enable profound forms of engagement, regulation, and expression for children and young people with PMLD. The project's strongest impact lies not in discrete outcomes or performative moments, but in the cultivation of sustained, human-to-human encounters where pupils are met as full communicators, agents, and creative contributors

The project illustrates that when children are given time, consistency, relational safety and meaningful sensory invitations, they not only engage, but lead. Rise and Shine cohorts remembered, anticipated, and expressed in ways that challenge normative definitions of participation and performance.



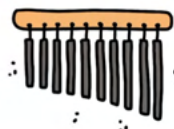
...and I just feel like it makes him a little bit **more engaged in his lesson** then in the afternoon...more awake and d'ya know being **able to follow instruction** a little bit more... Just a few seconds quicker.

-Teaching Assistant



Elijah, a child who initially presented as quite shy and clingy, yet the class teacher was impressed with how he then went on to perform in front of others at Expressions. This was deemed **a marked improvement in confidence** for Elijah given his tendency to become overwhelmed, to the point where it looked as if the child **understood and gained a lot** from being in front of an audience, in receiving applause and taking this all in whilst onstage.

-Class Teacher



The teaching assistant describes Issac repeatedly **seeking through eye contact a relationship** with them, through their gaze, and seeking eye contact with the dance artist who was shaking bells the other side of them. Describing Issac **smiling, waving** their bells as if to say, '**Look what I am doing**', and seeming impressed with themselves, as an activity they were **fully able to engage in**.

-Teaching Assistant

A key discovery we made was that Rhea could move all her fingers and feet, up until this point our understanding was that she could only move one finger. Meaning invitations with sensory props and instruments were difficult for Rhea to access purposefully, until during one session a teaching assistant placed a tambourine on Rhea's foot.

This entry point of engagement through a different body part provided her with a **fuller access and freedom of movement** to shake and move, this proved to be a gamechanger, opening **new avenues of movement** offer and engagement within school and the Rise and Shine sessions for her.

-Rise & Shine Artist



*Pupil names have been changed to maintain anonymity



THE PEDAGOGY



Through **repetition**, **calm environments**, and **narrative-led structures**, pupils consistently showed increased tolerance, anticipation, emotional regulation and moments of intentional physical, social and communicative engagement.



Artists developed deeper confidence in working with **non-verbal communication**, micro-responses, and body-led cues, learning to **trust stillness**, pacing and sensory attunement as valid and meaningful forms of engagement.



Decision-making became more stripped back and intentional, with **less content**, **fewer stimuli**, and greater emphasis on **repetition**, **agency**, and **co-regulation**.



Music and movement were **integrated sensory languages**, capable of holding both individual and collective experiences simultaneously.



Reframed success: away from visible participation or uniform engagement, and toward recognising individual journeys, remembered experiences, and subtle shifts in affect, attention and agency.



Capacity to **observe**, **reflect** and **respond** in the moment.



Pupils decide how, when, and in what way they participate within sessions, engagement at any level is considered valid. The freedom to opt in or out is recognised and respected.



Choice is scaffolded, offering **limited**, **clear choices** (e.g. two options) supports accessibility without overwhelming pupils.



Negotiation and **Improvisation**: Artists continually **offer**, **try**, and **adapt** approaches; a refusal once does not preclude future engagement.



IMPACT IN THE CLASSROOM

The response to Rise & Shine has been overwhelmingly positive across schools, with staff consistently expressing deep gratitude for the opportunity to participate and for the impact(s) they have witnessed in their students.

Across the programme, schools have highlighted how the project carved out rare, protected one-to-one time for PMLD learners, time in which staff could slow down, observe deeply, and be guided by students' responses. This discovery-led, relational mode of interaction created new opportunities for class teachers and teaching assistants to gain an enriched understanding of a student's communication, preferences, behaviours, and ways of being.

Many described 'aha moments' in which aspects of a learner emerged that had previously not been seen, informing future classroom strategies, and facilitating more attuned modes of interaction.



“The first time we ever heard Harun vocalise was in a Northern Ballet session in school. And it was when [the music therapist] was playing the saxophone next to him. And he really vocalised and we were like “Their making a noise...” But now he does that all the time, and we've really worked out like how to make him like laugh and smile....once we knew he [was] capable of vocalising, it was like, we've got to get that noise out of him more. So that was a real wow moment.

-Class Teacher and Deputy Head

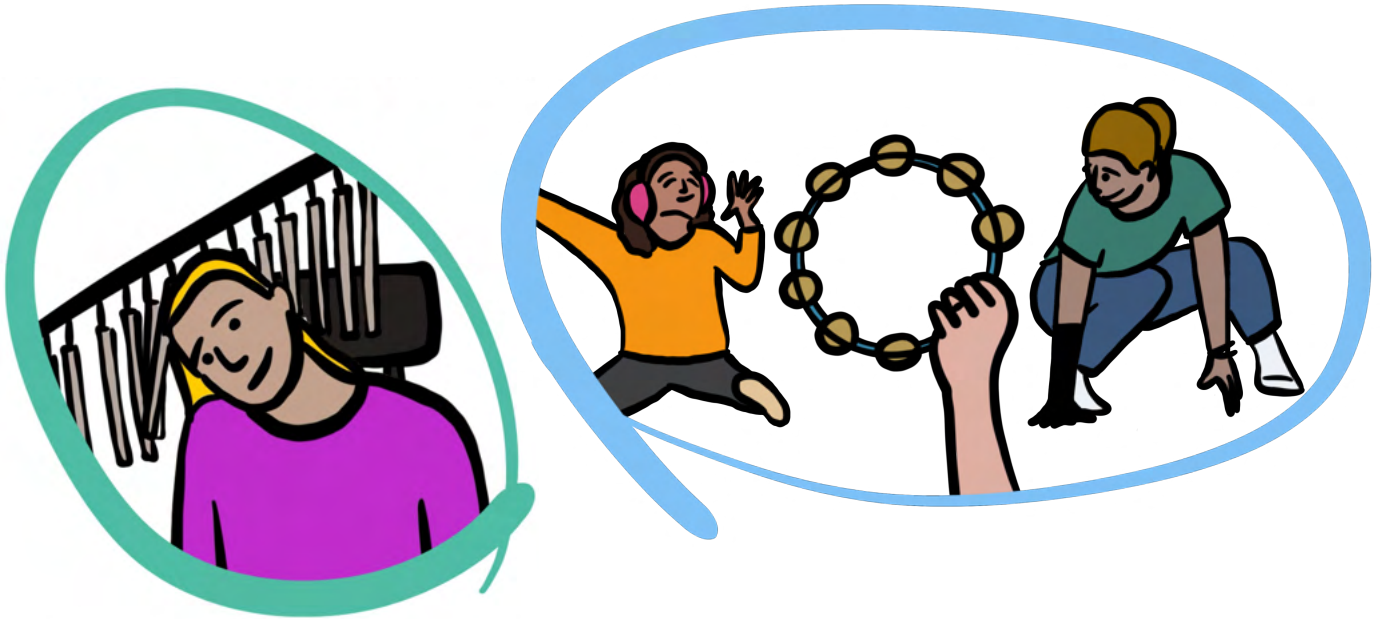
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LEAD ARTIST SUMMARY



During the Rise & Shine project, we developed a dance pedagogy rooted in responsiveness, sensory awareness, and participant-led interaction while working with learners with PMLD. Rather than prioritising set choreography, the approach centred on creating a safe, consistent environment where movement emerged through individual choice, repetition, and attunement to each student's physical and emotional cues. Dance was used as a multisensory tool, integrating music, touch, rhythm, and stillness to support communication, engagement, and wellbeing cues. Dance was used as a multisensory tool, integrating music, touch, rhythm, and stillness to support communication, engagement, and wellbeing.

The spider dance is a great example of this integration. Wearing a black glove to represent a spider the support artist danced for the participants; rolling on the floor, jumping and twirling, all of which generated anticipation and excitement. After gaining consent by offering a hand-under-hand invitation, the lead artist then danced with the black glove on the pupil's arms and hands. Any small movement from the participant instigated the artist to move; when the participant paused, so would the artist. Live music enhanced the experience by matching sound to the movement and pausing when the participant prompted stillness. This movement developed over the weeks, and some participants offered vocalisations to prompt bigger movements from the dancing glove.



Central to this pedagogy was close collaboration with school staff, valuing their specialist knowledge of the students and ensuring our artistic approach was aligned with existing school practices. This pedagogy valued presence over performance, recognising small gestures, breath, and eye contact as meaningful movement responses, and positioned the artists as facilitators who adapt in the moment to amplify each student's agency and expression.

One student only had mobility in their eyes and a small range of movement with their head. After observing and building a relationship with the student, we recognised that they would move their head when they enjoyed an activity and could do so with intention. To provide them with some sensory feedback from this movement choice, we placed a windchime near the side of their face, and after rotating their head, they heard the twinkling sound of the instrument. We were gifted with a huge smile, and they continued to do this several times. We developed this exercise, moving the windchime further out of reach and added a torch for them to track during the rotation of their head. Once the participant was familiar with this exercise and knew they were leading the sensory feedback, the music therapist removed the windchime and made a vocal sound every time the participant moved their eyes or head and honoured the details such as speed, direction (matched in pitch and location), dynamics and stillness. The simplicity and accessibility of the exercise allowed for school staff to continue this exercise with the participant outside of the Rise & Shine sessions.

This summary was compiled from the findings by Dr Louise McDowall. You can request a copy of the full evaluative report by emailing Learning@northernballet.com

Northern Ballet work in mainstream and SEND schools. To find out more visit our website northernballet.com/join-in/education/schools or contact us on Learning@northernballet.com



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