

The Shakespeare Schools' Foundation has had a massive impact on the lives of my mixed year seven and eight SEN students. When they start school in September, I compare them to separate pieces of a jigsaw puzzle - all different and going in their own directions, only concerned about themselves and quite often detached from their peer group as they are not yet familiar with each other. The nature of autism (from the Greek word 'auto' meaning self) often means that most of my students find it difficult to relate to others, understand their own feelings and emotions, show empathy or communicate effectively with others.

Paired with this many of them experience additional sensory issues meaning that they may have problems with bright lights, loud noises, open spaces, crowded areas or touch - everything that a theatre experience encompasses.

Through the SSF process and rehearsal phase, which for our school lasts for a period of only two months, the students are precision taught to connect with and support each other, be tolerant towards one another and communicate effectively together, so that in the end, those separate pieces of a jigsaw puzzle come together to form a big picture, which is the end performance and ultimately tells a thousand words.

At the end of the experience, my students are often elated, they certainly want to do it again. They have experienced a change. Things they found extremely challenging are overcome. They suddenly believe that with hard work and determination and support from their peers and teachers, that they can achieve anything! Things they perceived to be impossible for them are now achievable.

Following the 2016 SSF performance, in February 2017, our class took 'The Tempest' on tour. We visited local primary, secondary and special schools in a bid to raise awareness of how much children with additional educational needs (including autism) can achieve. The tour involved a question and answer session with our students at the end of the play. This is what some of them said:

"I didn't think I would be able to go on stage, I was very frightened, but I did it, I remembered everything and that made me proud." Jack, Year Eight (Ferdinand).

"It made me more confident and got rid of my stage fright. I used to run away and was violent towards myself, now I find other ways to deal with my anxieties." Alex, Year Seven (Caliban).

"I have problems remembering things and didn't think that I'd be able to remember all of my lines, but I could!!!" Rosie, Year seven (Ariel).

"At first I couldn't understand the language, but the more we worked on it, the easier it was to understand." Mark, Year Seven (Prospero).

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