Oval House

Mohamed had very limited English – just a handful of words. Within three weeks of joining theatre Oval House Theatre's workshops for young refugees and asylum seekers the teenager had taken on the lead character in a theatre production and taught his classmates traditional Afghan dances.

Such outcomes illustrate how Oval House Theatre, based in South London, has enabled young exiles to gain confidence and a sense of achievement.

"They can be illiterate or semi-literate, and are not achieving success in a classroom environment, but through coming here they are able to experience success and to be seen as successful by their peers and other people," explains Stella Barnes, Head of Arts in Education at Oval House.

"The arts offer processes which don't rely on fluency in English language. Time after time we see how children who are low status and low achieving in other contexts suddenly blossom and are successful. We have young men who are fully qualified mechanics coming to us at the age of 14 who are seen as failures in school. Here we help them to succeed."

Oval House is working with more than 60 young refugees and asylum seekers aged between 12 and 19 through its *Living Here* project. It offers participatory arts activities including drama, photography, visual arts and puppetry with children from school and those without school places. It is filling a gap in provision for those who often don't have full time education, and are struggling to come to terms with life, language and expectations in a new country.

It has been working with refugees and asylum seekers since the 1980s, when it supported exiles from South Africa. This work has now become a key strand of its offer to the community in south London. It works with Lambeth Ethnic Minority Achievement Service and other refugee service providers to provide outreach workshops and activities in primary and secondary schools. It has partnerships with three local schools.

One example of such a partnership is its work with Charles Edward Brooke School in Lambeth, which has a specialist unit catering for around 40 asylum seekers and refugees aged between 14 and 16. It's a broad mix of cultures from Afghanistan, Iran, Somalia, Central Africa, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Guinea. When Oval House started working with the group in 2004 one of the challenges was a lack of cross-cultural exchange within the group, which was exacerbated by tensions over caste and gender issues.

Living Here has taken the group out of the school environment once a week and enabled them to mix outside their normal cohort at Oval House. “We are offering a bit of human time when they can meet and have cake and fruit and a chat, which is harder to do in a school context. They will hang around in the Oval House café together and sometimes we will bring in older refugees and community workers to talk to them, before they go into the workshop. Our artists have really worked hard to build their confidence and encourage them to cross cultural boundaries socially,” says Barnes.

Through Living Here the groups also get to meet refugees and asylum seekers from other schools and special units – there were 150 youngsters at the venue when Oval House brought them together to celebrate World Arts Day in 2006.

Alongside *Living Here* Oval House has been co-developing *Flight Paths*, a programme of professional support and development for refugee artists across London. It has enabled exiled artists to train for arts in education settings via placements and by shadowing other artists. As a result, two of Oval House’s own arts in education team are former Flight Paths trainees, and therefore highly sensitive to the needs of the young people involved in *Living Here*.

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