

# Building communication, coordination and confidence through African dance



Photo Courtesy of Kingsweston School

Kingsweston School  
Key Stage 3  
Creative Practitioner: Kenzi Ireland

## Background to the school

Kingsweston School is a multi-site special school in North Bristol for pupils aged 4 to 19 years with an Educational Health and Care Plan (EHCP). It serves a wide geographical area including Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, North East Somerset and Bath (BANES). Kingsweston School caters for pupils with Autism and a range of additional and/or associated learning needs and sensory impairment. As noted on the school's website, it offers "a personalised, ambitious curriculum that entices curiosity and develops skills for life. We promote a sense of identity and belonging to our school, local and wider community. We support our learners to flourish into healthy and resilient individuals. We champion independence and self-advocacy so the learner's voice is heard and respected. We achieve this through our values of Creativity, Connectedness, Nurture and Empowerment."

## Specific residency objectives:

- **To implement opportunities for dance as a form of self-expression.**
- **To develop pupils' communication, coordination and confidence through movement and dance.**
- **To provide opportunities for pupils to explore a different culture.**
- **To support teachers at Kingsweston School to develop their own knowledge and experience of working artistically with young people in new and creative ways.**
- **To support the creative practitioner to gain more experience of leading a residency with young people with a range of specific learning needs in a special school context.**

### Aims and synopsis for the residency

Pupils at Kingsweston School love music and the benefits this brings to their learning and lives is recognised across the school. With the ambition of tapping into their interests and enthusiasm for learning in practical and creative ways, staff at Kingsweston School wanted to use this residency to help pupils develop skills and competencies to support them in life and learning; in particular, communication, confidence and coordination. With support from WEMA’s Cultural Education Hub they chose to work with Kenzi Ireland, specialist in African dance forms.

On Mondays over terms 2 and 3 from November-February 2025, Kenzi worked at Brightstowe site with pupils in four mixed-age Key Stage 3 classes, all with Autism and

a range of challenges related to socialising, communication and coordination.

Whilst the focus of each class was around African dancing, Kenzi personalised the experience for each class to meet the needs and aspirations of pupils of each group. In the first half term, workshops followed a similar structure each week and pupils participated in warm ups, rhythm games, exercises and learnt simple choreography, alongside frequent opportunities for freestyling and creative exploration. A stimulus for one group in the second half term was the illustrated book Arcadia by Odira Ighamre, illustrated by Judith Elliot, which is set in Africa and explores current environmental issues. The illustrations in the book were used as stimuli for movement and discussion. Another group explored aspects of the history of African people’s dance from past to present. Every session provided opportunities for pupils to develop and share their own choreography and creative ideas and sought for them to be able to collaborate effectively.

“ Kenzi made such a positive difference to Brightstowe, the people looked forward to the sessions and really enjoyed Monday mornings for a change.

Some of the pupils involved not only have ASD but have significant learning difficulties and one pupil has a severe visual impairment - Kenzi managed to include all of these pupils and they all had fun.

Kenzi shared the history of African dance to two groups which she differentiated with adapted PowerPoints, a story and video clips.

We already miss her and her passion for African dance, its history and her ability to be inclusive.



Ms Remington, Teacher

Teachers across the school wrote down and recorded comments and feedback from pupils throughout each week, offering an insight into how this dance residency was received by pupils and how it potentially impacted their learning and engagement in other ways. Sessions at the beginning, middle and end of the residency were also observed by the school’s music lead, who was central to setting up this residency.

Across the residency Kenzi delivered 13 weekly sessions across terms 2 and 3 between November and February for a total of 23 students.

## Key Outcomes

### Young People

➤ A specially prepared social story written for the young people at Kingsweston School and shared with them prior to and during the residency was considered crucial in supporting them to be able to engage in this unfamiliar experience with a person they didn't know prior to the residency. It also helped them to transition out of the residency as they were prepared for it coming to an end.

➤ Having the residency on a Monday helped some pupils slide more easily into the school week, which could be tricky for them after the weekend. It was reported that it set them up well for a positive start to the week and was talked about and drawn upon throughout the whole week in their classes and with the teachers and support staff.

➤ Each workshop provided opportunities for pupils to lead aspects if they wanted to, including using their voices and bodies to create rhythms, sounds and movements for others to follow. This was very popular with pupils and the opportunities to be creative and expressive were noted as a highlight by some pupils.



Photo Courtesy of Kingsweston School

“ Confidence was the first thing that just completely amazed me, because they are adolescents, they are teenagers, but they could be a bit shy, not because they are autistic... But the moment that they were given the chance to show the skills or to, as Kenzi was saying, oh, 'let's come at the front and do this type of dance' ... they didn't show that anymore. After the second or third session, they were like, 'yeah, I can do that'. And they received claps and everybody cheered for them. So that meant that the confidence absolutely grew from the start. ”

Cinthia Chiluiza, Teacher

➤ The creative artist, teachers and other adults from Kingsweston School and the young people themselves saw progress being made week-on-week as pupils gained more confidence and had opportunities to build upon and extend their prior learning. This progress was multi-faceted and included their accuracy, timing and fluency in the dance, their ability to remember choreography and aspects of improvement such as their own spatial awareness, confidence to take part and try out new things and to communicate ideas and express themselves.

➤ Repetition helped pupils to engage and focus; some who were more reticent at the beginning joined in during later sessions as they become more familiar with the content and structure. It was also noted that some of the repetition in rhythms, vocal sounds and dance steps was later repeated and/or developed spontaneously by pupils in other contexts.

➤ Staff reported that pupils were able to concentrate for extended periods of time during the dance workshops and that breaking the sessions into multiple parts worked well for maintaining interest and engagement. Some pupils surprised the adults in the room in relation to what they could achieve and their levels of engagement.

➤ For some pupils, dance and movement is clearly very important to them and engagement in the sessions has allowed them to express themselves and communicate with others in ways that haven't been so obvious previously. The degree of support and encouragement for each other was also noted as a highlight by adults in the sessions.

➤ The repertoire chosen included a mix of familiar and probably unfamiliar tracks; all selected to be joyous and uplifting and well received by pupils. The workshops successfully built bridges between new experiences and music and ideas that pupils were more familiar with, contextualising the new ideas in helpful and understandable ways so that pupils could see the relevance in their own lives.



Photo Courtesy of Kingsweston School

“ It was so good, I like dancing, I liked the jump spin. I feel happy. ”

KS3 pupil

**Staff**

➤ Staff in the school were pleased and surprised by the high levels of engagement and outcomes for individual pupils and groups of pupils in each workshop. Kingsweston School is ambitious for all pupils and observing how well some pupils took to African Dance and the ways in which they engaged with the wider learning about the culture and practices has sparked new ideas for how to be even more ambitious for pupils in the future.

➤ Young people's high levels of engagement in the workshops, and particularly the opportunities to lead and express themselves, were noted as an exceptional outcome by some of the staff who attended and joined in with the workshops.

➤ It was noted that pupils engaged well with the storytelling and many showed a genuine interest in learning about an unfamiliar culture. The ways in which they engaged in storytelling, at times in a very tactile and active way, has given ideas for approaches to the curriculum in the future, highlighting the potential of creative arts to unlock access to other curriculum areas such as literacy. The good choice of text in this residency has also sparked further ideas for stimuli that draw upon young people's interests and concerns.

➤ One of the teachers reflected on the contribution that dance made to the pupils' health as well as their creative and



expressive development, and this included mental as well as physical health. She shared examples of pupils being able to talk about how the dance made them feel, noting that communicating feelings was something that many pupils rarely did as they found this extremely challenging.

### Creative practitioner

➤ For Kenzi, the creative practitioner leading these workshops, this residency provided opportunities for her to consolidate and expand her own experience of working with young people with a wide range of learning needs in a special school setting. She sought advice and guidance from the school prior to starting the residency and also had a planning session with the Inclusion Lead at West of England Music and Arts (WEMA), both of which she noted that she found very useful and led her to “strip it [the delivery] down and start with a clear structure and a clear foundation, which was repeated and built upon”.

➤ The residency helped the creative practitioner to recognise that being able to draw upon the wide range of skills in her toolkit, developed through leading workshops and longer programmes in a range of other settings over many years, were key to the very flexible approaches

“ It was particularly good to hear feedback from the teachers about the young people and the different things that they were noticing, because for me, I'm just there for that one session. I only see them in that context. So, I'm not able to necessarily measure and see how it's maybe affecting them in other ways.

Kenzi Ireland, Creative Practitioner



Photo Courtesy of Kingsweston School

that she needed to take in this special school setting and which she feels were ultimately the key to successfully engaging these pupils.

➤ The residency built the creative practitioner's confidence in her own abilities to be able to plan and lead well in this special school context and she was thankful for the opportunities to work alongside colleagues in a variety of roles who knew the pupils well. This helped her develop new strategies and techniques relating to maintaining positive behaviours and engagement, drawing upon her wealth of prior experience. She was widely praised for being attuned to the evolving situations in the class and reading the need to move on or stay on an activity very well.

➤ Her approach also reaffirmed the importance of giving autonomy and opportunities for creativity to the young people; something which she considers a hallmark across her work. She put a great deal of time and energy into introducing these opportunities in ways which built and embedded trust with each pupil and also between the young people in each workshop so that they supported, encouraged and celebrated each other and their own contribution to the collective dance.

## Unexpected outcomes, challenges and further considerations

➤ For young people at Kingsweston School, it can take time to build relationships and to feel comfortable and confident to engage. A residency offers the necessary opportunities for them to be able to have this time, which one-off or short programmes do not afford. This meant that more young people were able to join in once they felt safe enough to do so and were familiar with the repetitive structure of the workshops delivered by a new person.

➤ The uniqueness of this opportunity, happening as enrichment within the school day, was pointed out by one of the teachers. Many young people with special educational needs and disabilities are unable to access the opportunities on offer outside of school compared to those in mainstream education and yet the importance of being able to experience something new, developing their own unique creative expression and feeling part of something they enjoy is just as important.

➤ The importance of being able to have ongoing professional dialogue and communication between the creative practitioner and the staff in the school was highlighted in this residency and, as with all the WEMA residencies, built into the programme. Both the creative practitioner and the school noted this as crucial to the success at Kingsweston School, because it helped to both provide a rich experience for the young people and also facilitated co-learning between the creative practitioner and the staff in the workshops.

➤ In a rich discussion about legacy, we talked about the importance of having opportunities for pupils to work with, and be inspired by, expert practitioners who are often highly specialised in a particular artform. Clearly, teachers cannot just 'take over' this work where it left off and continue it without this level of expertise, and Kingsweston School hope to work with the creative artist again in the future to build on the residency if funding allows. However, legacy is built and can be maintained in other ways - particularly continuing to develop the habits, values, behaviours and attitudes that pupils have shown during the workshops. In small ways, staff will also be able to use or adapt some of the practices and techniques from the workshops to develop communication and coordination, adding to their own repertoire to build these crucial skills as a result of observing and working alongside the creative artist.

➤ Even where pupils didn't want to dance, ways were found for them to actively enjoy being part of the workshops if they wanted to, for example through filming part of the choreography, reading part of the story to the class and taking part in discussions. For this to happen, there needs to be professional trust and understanding, and a high degree of partnership working and communication between the creative artist and the adults in the room, who know pupils well and can read emergent situations and behaviours in-the-moment, as happened in this residency. Being flexible and adaptable whilst encouraging, recognising that young people can experience something and learn in different ways without jumping straight in is also fine, as shown here, as some pupils took more time to become comfortable with this new learning situation.

➤ The physical space in a school is often not the absolute ideal space but another aspect of flexibility that is needed by a creative artist is to adapt to this (as well as to negotiate where possible!), as happened in Kingsweston’s residency.

➤ Working in special schools in particular requires a great deal of flexibility in relation to gauging “how we know” the impact of the work and to gain the insights of the young people. As demonstrated so clearly in this residency, this relies on working closely with the adults supporting the young people who know the participants well in order to elicit this information and read and reflect on situations, emotional and physical responses, behaviours and outcomes that are emergent in-the-moment and may be verbal or non-verbal and show joy as well as distress or discomfort. Using an appropriate range of communication methods to hear the young people’s input and as a means for them to express themselves, is also crucial, all of which were demonstrated in the residency at Kingsweston School.

“ The dance sessions were so engaging and students absolutely loved them! Students had so much fun and felt so empowered when given opportunities to share movements. Students really grew in confidence throughout the sessions. There was always a real sense of joy in the room and students learnt so much!

M. Henderson,  
Assistant Headteacher

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One last thing that was really amazing as well was the communication ... teachers kept thinking and saying, ‘how come they can focus for that long?’ And they are so interested in all of these stories and the books and the videos... They were all super engaged and they could talk about that. So when Kenzi is gone ... they keep talking about this stuff with the teachers, what they saw, what they felt, or the music, and how did it make them feel, or things like that. And that was for me the best part of it, because that’s really hard for our cohort.

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Cinthia Chiliza, Teacher

### Kenzi Ireland:

Kenzi Ireland is an experienced dance artist, specialising in African dance forms with over 18 years’ experience as a professional performer, choreographer and teacher. Kenzi has travelled to Senegal, Ghana and Gambia to deepen her knowledge and experience of traditional African dance, has trained and performed with companies and professional dance practitioners from around the globe and has performed across Wales, the UK and Europe with ‘NIMBA African Dance & Music’.

Kenzi is an empowering teacher and an inspiring performer, delivering high quality dance experiences, her enthusiasm and passion for dance is infectious. Drawing from the strengths and diversity of African dance forms, her work aims to inspire true and honest expression and to celebrate and enrich our appreciation of dance of the African Diaspora.

[www.kenzidance.com](http://www.kenzidance.com)

