

Sabita Kumari-Dass: Protege

Protege is an 'aspirational and cross genre' charity working with 35-45 'divergent' young people aged 12-24 with 'exceptional needs ... [with] six week projects that you have to fit into rather than fit around your needs'. Sabita is their only full-time employee, the other workers are freelance artists. Sabita finds art isn't 'rigorous and regimented' like many subjects so they use artists to teach skills. Many empathise with learners as they've 'had something similar in their lives where they've felt a disconnection from society. ... They definitely relate to that idea of having rescued themselves through their art'.

For British Science Week they have done a series of activities around explorers inspired by the botanist Joseph Hooker who travelled with Darwin to the Antarctic, transported many plants to the UK and set up Kew Gardens. These projects extend well beyond BSW as it may take weeks for a participant to begin engaging and you have to respect 'when they're ready to do the work'.



How did British Science Week funding help?

Organisation: 'The BSA opportunity has been really fantastic because it means that we can legitimately say ... projects have been funded with science funding by a national, very credible, high profile organisation that really has proven excellence in the field' and these projects have delivered their usual outcomes and science outcomes. The £500 is 'lovely' and is a motivator to do more science, 'it's been a way of getting a little bit more money for stuff we really want to do' particularly on mental health. BSW has filtered into other work as Protege are '**crossing that line between science and art more comfortably all the time**'. Before BSW, they'd been looking at issues in their participants' lives: Huntingdon's, chronic regional pain syndrome, eating disorders and their impact on mental and physical health. But their projects had heritage or arts angles due to the funding. The BSA grant enabled us to think 'we could be credible, we're being asked to be positive, to be confident about our ability to do a science project'. After three years, they're now confident and know their cohort will get something from BSW distinct from a purely arts project.

Participants: First, they worked with young women, long-term hospitalised with illnesses around neglect, abuse and trauma that were triggered in the transition to secondary school. People in hospital are cared for but outside their natural environment so the project was motivated by an exploration of what happens to species when you take them out of their natural environment. This was a way for learners to look at 'their own health and well-being: It's not just that I'm somebody who doesn't grow well or it's not that I'm an unhealthy person. I'm not sick as just certain environments make me less well. I can be more well'. Second, they worked with children with severe ADHD asking them to put themselves in the role of an explorer 'gathering knowledge about how to succeed in different professions'. Many don't normally participate and 'they were really getting involved, really enjoying the project'. Attendance and the work produced were good and all participants got an Arts Award, their first and only qualification for some. As a result, three students did work experience at Protege's gallery. **Their communication skills improved, shifting from 'calling each other names' to 'watching each other present work and just lapping it up and applauding each other**'. 'Because of the science element, it felt important to the students. ...

They really got into the idea of this is a hard project, we've got to support each other and you know explorers couldn't have done what they did if their teams had criticised them and called them names or laughed at them'. The school walls are filled with rappers and street art, **'but there is something about science for all of us not just for the students for us as a team as well which kind of just makes you up your game: "Right, I've got to, I'm absorbing hard facts here"'**. Protege's work has a reach beyond the young people and artists themselves as they have a public-facing gallery, website and Instagram, and reach different communities via each media.

Organiser: Sabita enjoyed school and her 'wonderful teachers' seeing it as a 'passport out' of her parents' manual labour. Protege is a result of her sadness that some young people can go through school 'feeling unloved and not loving anything about it' on the basis that 'for everyone there is someone who can make you want to learn'. She worked in television, then at Central St Martins where she managed exhibitions on Leonardo da Vinci. Via the Leonardo project she got to know scientists and science but with the failed bids, she 'lost the confidence that I'd kind of gained a bit by working on the Leonardo project'. BSW brought that back. She's considered studying child psychotherapy but 'what's been really wonderful is we've kind of just evolved this and it's been very organic and so we haven't followed anyone's set theories'. 'I'd like a stamp of authority sometimes' but 'it's good to have the freedom of a more responsive two-way relationship with science' rejecting science's rigidity and 'owning it': 'having the right to be in that area where everyone else is a scientist but to be asking the questions you want to ask. ... When you come at a very authoritative subject in your own way, it gives you something, a kind of very legitimate way in which to share what you're doing. ... We have a whole lot of stuff that we bring to it that enriches the conversations for us'.

British Science Week is run by the British Science Association

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