



VX LABS

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 2025-26

REPORT

In partnership with Z-arts

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VX Labs Report: Children and Young People

Lab Summary

Research Question (original): **How do we create accessible theatre work for children and young people who don't read?** This evolved through the process into something more akin to: **How does a theatre process and product for children and young people emerge when accessibility is assumed as a creative opportunity?**

A secondary process sat beneath this around the commissioning of work for children and young people driven by the Lab delivery partner, Z-arts namely: **How can the research process be expressed as contractual imperatives in the commissioning of all work for children and young people?**

Summary of Findings

A joyful, successful week produced an **accessible, high-quality sharing for children and young people**, shaped by artists (many with lived experience of being d/Deaf, Disabled or Neurodivergent). The process was authentic, collaborative, and values-driven, resulting in a final sharing that was very well received.

Key Success Factors

1. Preparation and Interstitial Spaces

- Careful attention to practicalities (admin, logistics, school visits, coordination) created the conditions for success.
- These “spaces between structures” were as important as the creative week itself.

2. Strong Partnerships

- Z-arts and partners offered ambition, resources, and goodwill.
- Shared values (accessibility, quality, co-creation) created a united approach.

3. The Right People – a “Crack Team”

- A diverse mix of skills and perspectives ensured creativity and accessibility.

- Practical and emotional access needs were met, enriching the space.

4. **Lived Experience at the Core**

- Disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent artists brought authenticity, integrity, and creativity.
- Representation of lived experiences made access integral, not an afterthought.

5. **Values-Led, Emotionally Intelligent Practice**

- Leadership rooted in empathy, respect, and inclusion.
- Children treated as genuine co-creators, with their ideas shaping the work.

6. **Abundance Mindset**

- Adequate resources enabled rigour, but generosity, openness, and innovation mattered most.
- Challenges were reframed as opportunities.

7. **360-Degree Access Approach**

- Integrated BSL, Audio Description, and inclusive practices from the outset.
- Access seen as creative enrichment (“Aesthetics of Access”), not a limitation.

Concluding Finding

The Children and Young People’s Lab showed that accessible theatre for children is **not a compromise but an enhancement** of creative practice. By embedding lived experience, strong partnerships, emotional intelligence, and integrated access at every stage, the Lab demonstrated that accessibility is a driver for innovation, joy, and quality. The result was not just a successful sharing, but a model of how future work can be made: **authentic, collaborative, and artistically ambitious – with children and young people at its heart.**

Overview of the VX Labs

Vital Xposure (VX) are a disabled-led touring theatre company that promotes hidden voices with extraordinary stories to tell. For over a decade, VX have made disabled-led radical, political performance championing hidden, marginalised stories.

VX Labs is a cutting-edge three-year research programme supported through Arts Council England. The programme is delivered in partnership with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama as well as regional theatres. It aims to explore disabled-led performance at the cutting edge of access and create the opportunity for learning that has the ability to make change. The research is styled in the Lab space to provide opportunities for disabled artists to push at the boundaries of possibility in a practical, experimental space.

VX Labs recognises that with theatre spaces certain provisions are created that pertain to access with captioning, audio description and signed performance now more common alongside relaxed performances. The Labs programme began with a consultation which identified that these mainstream access provisions are somewhat perfunctory, not embedded and often limited to one performance. Similarly, many of these means of accessing performance are retrofitted meaning that opportunities to be creative with them or use them more effectively to tell a story are often ignored in favour of this easier, cheaper option.

“It’s a bit like retrofitting an old building with a lift – often they’re the shittest, clunkiest, slowest crappiest lifts, aren’t they? And I imagine that’s what it’s like if you try to retro fit BSL, or audio description. It’s not a good experience. Captioning has to be in from the start.” VX Lab consultee

The second key area of exploration for the Labs that emerged through the consultation was a re-visiting of the political, cultural and professional barriers that people continue to be disabled by. In other words, whilst there is a recognition that the Social Model of disability is as Mike Oliver suggests ‘a practical tool, not a theory, an idea or concept.’ (2008) there is a pressing need to push this way of thinking about disabled-led work further,

“I regard the social model as a valuable empirically grounded perspective, which has contributed greatly to changing society’s relationship with disabled people and to its understanding of disability. I argue that the strength of this model stems from the insights it provides, and that its scope does not need to be restricted to immediate practical applications.” Leavitt, JM (2017)

In other words, whilst the social model of disability has resulted in disabled artists becoming more socially and culturally included within many theatres who are broadly willing to make reasonable adjustments – there is still a feeling among those disabled artists who were consulted as part of the VX Labs process, that limitations are set on what they can make theatre about, with whom they can do that, who their audience is and what represents a permissible budget for real, creative access. Finally, whilst there is a considerable push toward early career disabled artists across the industry, many in the middle stages of their career are left floundering with no clear pathway to fulfil their artistic ambition.

Introduction to the Children and Young People's Lab

Why this Lab?

The Lab grew out of a conversation with Z-arts. The Manchester based Z-arts is the only arts centre in the UK dedicated to children and families. The conversation recognised that whilst a number of theatres were dedicated to creating excellent and accessible work for children and young people, much of this was focused on early years and some on older young people. Indeed, early years work was often miles ahead in how accessibility was embedded in the process. Z-arts remit is also leading strategically on best practice for children, young people and families' work both locally in Greater Manchester and nationally. This remit, allied to the strategic ambition of the VX Labs to push forward the conversation about disabled-led work, felt like an opportunity to push at the boundaries of what is possible for children and young people in the creating of new work for the stage.

There are many theatre companies in England that centre the work of children and young people, others that are creating work that is specifically disabled-led. Notable examples of children and young people's work that is at the cutting edge of accessible work are companies like Unicorn who create 'thought provoking, innovative work.' Others include Half Moon, Polka Theatre, Little Angel in the capital and a smattering of work made by regional companies like Soapbox in Plymouth, and Bamboozle in Leicester. Multiple companies are pushing forward what disabled-led theatre is for adults including Graeae, Little Cog and Birds of Paradise (Scottish) as examples. Both Z-arts and VX were therefore looking to use the Lab opportunity to push forward the conversation rather than replicate what others were doing.

The driving force was to understand how to make the making of accessible work for children transparent and available, to short-cut the need for the replication of learning processes and, from Z-arts perspective:

"...able to have a toolkit to use both ourselves for any commissions we make, but also to share with artists who come through our development programme - a lofty aim to make creatives consider how to make their work as accessible as possible, from the moment they get the first glimmer of an idea." Liz O'Neill,
CEO and Artistic Director Z-arts

VX's remit complements this namely to further the conversation, which includes conversations in relation to the possibility of creating the most accessible theatre for children and young people.

Lab set up

Context

The Lab set-up was aided by the existing relationship between the researcher and Z-arts and a commitment to high-quality work for children and young people's theatre. Even in 2022, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) had a blog post entitled **Why Theatre For Young People is worth investing in.**¹ The set up for this Lab was that not only is it worth investing in, but it is also the lifeblood of all theatre.

*"I think the reason that theatre for young people isn't taken seriously enough is because as a society we don't take young people seriously enough. That creates a vicious cycle, which ends up with chronic underinvestment in theatre for young people and assumptions that what is aimed at young people is somehow less valuable, less clever and less worthwhile. Theatre for young audiences is some of the most important work we do – arguably **the** most important work that we do."* Robin Belfield, Head of National Partnerships RSC

Z-arts begin from a place where they elevate work for children and young people. This is not about future careers, but about the intrinsic value of high-quality work for ALL young people, and spaces that prioritise the needs of ALL young people. It is the most important work. And accessible work for children and young people is also the bedrock of their ambition. This starting point for the Lab was never expressly articulated but intrinsic to the philosophical position of those initially involved. At all stages of the process, Z-arts was an equal and committed partner with VX, and this also made a significant difference to the output.

Whilst 79% of Arts Council England (ACE) NPOs announced in 2023² have a 'learning programme' not all learning programmes are created equally. The ACE's **Let's Create** strategy centres participation but the variation in what that means is wide, and largely open to interpretation. No educator was recruited to the ACE review panel announced by the current Labour government, which feels like a significant omission. Whilst participation amongst adults went up in 2024³ no such similar statistic exists for children and young people. In addition, the participation of the most deprived communities is still lagging behind the least deprived. Arts provision in schools is decreasing – there has been an 11% decrease in the number of hours of art subject teaching since 2011, including

¹ <https://www.rsc.org.uk/first-encounters-twelfth-night-2022/theatre-for-young-people-is-worth-investing-in>

² <https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/latest-news-mar-25/#:~:text=According%20to%20ACE%20news%20when,share%20more%20on%20this%20soon>

³ <https://www.campaignforthearts.org/the-state-of-the-arts-one-year-on/>

13,000 fewer hours of Drama teaching across that time. Spending cuts to the Department of Culture, Media and Sports (DCMS) post the spending review in 2024/25 have impacted on the availability of funds. This invariably means that there is pressure on funds, which sometimes manifests in the work with, for and by children being sidelined or under-funded, and the work of access being less at the forefront of people's minds.

Initial meeting

Z-arts set up a group meeting with the Uncurbed Collective, (a disabled-led theatre company creating work, training artists and pushing for change through advocacy), TripleC (a gateway organisation for d/Deaf and/or neurodivergent people's access to the arts and screen industries) and Art with Heart (creating change through people-led creative programmes). This meeting allowed for a conversation to test ideas about what the Lab might be, and what it might focus on. From this the research question began its evolution. This was an open and wide-ranging conversation.

Research Question

How do we create accessible theatre work for children and young people who don't read? This evolved through the process into something more akin to: **How does a theatre process and product for children and young people emerge when accessibility is assumed as a creative opportunity?**

A secondary process sat beneath this around the commissioning of work for children and young people driven by the partner on the report, Z-arts namely: **How can the research process be expressed as contractual imperatives in the commissioning of all work for children and young people?**

The question evolved through additional planning meetings with Sarah Emmott, Creative Director, Art with Heart and Nickie Miles-Wildin, freelance theatre director, who were designated co-leads for the week. This was followed by a wish list of who should be in the room for the best chance of success.

Prep work

An important part of the Lab was the preparation work. This took two forms: firstly, a meeting between Sarah and Nickie who were new to working with each other, alongside a member of staff from Z-arts, Zoe Pickering, Head of Programming.

This was followed by setting up a number of introductory workshops with children and young people. This was critical to ensuring that children and young

people shaped the creative process, that their opinions, ambitions, and hopes for the piece were centred. The decision of what the play was about was largely driven by the young people – to that end, the research process focused on a children’s book that the children loved. Placing children at the heart of the process was critical and will be discussed more in the findings.

Bringing the Team Together

Whilst the preparation with the children and young people was essential to ensure that the process was responding to their needs and ambitions, this ran concurrently with a commitment to try and bring together a team who covered all of the necessary bases of creative access. A list of who the lead practitioners wanted to work with was created. There was a commitment to having people who were skilled, playful performers who had flexibility in their practice to make mistakes and have fun. Additionally, a range of technical and creative practices were also deemed necessary, including people who could design quickly, sound artists and someone who would be able to translate the visual aspects of the play in a creative way, including through captioning and visual imagery. There was a desire to have people with lived experience of d/Deaf, disability and neurodiversity. Taken together this felt like it would support the creative space to achieve the ambitions of the week. Ultimately, the room accommodated 3 performers, a role that was supplemented by the co-leads Sarah Emmott and Nickie Miles-Wildin.

In addition to the 2 lead creatives and the 3 performers across the 4 days of the Lab, the project was fortunate to have input from:

- a BSL consultant for 2 days,
- 2 BSL interpreters for each day for all 4 days,
- a lighting designer for 2 days,
- a designer for 3 days,
- a music and sound specialist for all 4 days of the Lab,
- an audio describer plus their access worker for all 4 days of the Lab.
- a movement specialist for 3 days of the Lab
- 3 days of ‘tech’ wizardry’ (captions and digital visual)
- This was supplemented by a technician and a few hours of additional making.

How the research was conducted

The delivery week took place at Z-arts, in their studio space. It took place between the 6th and 9th May 2025, culminating in a sharing event on the final day. Sessions ran daily between 10am and 5pm, with both lead artists delivering

after the rehearsal-based sessions completed, working late into the night. The ‘tech wizard’ who was working on the digital visuals and captions was not able to attend the sessions, but because of the nature of the work, was able to work from home.

The first day was largely an introduction process – with multiple games which were lots of fun, followed by a devising process that reflected a number of pages of the book, written in a comic format. The second last day was a more intense rehearsal process, as was the morning of the sharing event. The sharing event took place in the early afternoon to accommodate the school children’s timetable.

Two classes of children and young people attended the sharing session, alongside industry professionals and interested parties. The children took part in a Q and A at the end of the sharing. After the Lab completed, all artists involved reflected on the process through a survey. Z-arts staff responded to questions.

The research process was predominantly observation-based and provided an opportunity for reflection for those who delivered alongside a sharing for the children who could comment and question the process.

Findings

The findings section falls into two parts – namely, thematic findings followed by a short analysis of some quantifiable data from the artist surveys.

The week was a very joyous process that successfully delivered a piece of accessible work for children and young people. It accommodated artists with diverse lived experience, following a mostly fully accessible and fun process, and delivered a lovely sharing event that was very well-received. Many of the findings relate to how this was achieved in what was a very tight runaround. It is these identified ingredients that, taken together created the possibility of the created accessible work being successful.

It is also important to make it clear that the artists absolutely were at the heart of this and that their understanding and practice shaped the week to deliver the standard of work and sharing. Whilst the findings lay some shape to their approach, it is also important to recognise that they can’t be replicated exactly. The artists driving the process not only had a lived experience of why accessible theatre is needed for children, they also inhabited it. And that is amongst the truest parts of what was observed. It’s not to say that people without lived

experience can't deliver this work, only that the method in this case worked because it was so sincerely and absolutely meant. It was conscious, it was visible, it had integrity. It had care, and fun and an absolute commitment to delivering work that centred children and young people, and that placed access at its heart, without ever comprising what that meant in practice, process, and presentation.

Interstitial spaces in and around the process

The interstitial space refers to the space between structures, the space that exists between objects, elements and the established boundaries and “challenges traditional perspectives, emphasising fluidity”. (Mehrotra, 2008). The focus on pushing at the challenges of traditional perspectives manifested in a number of key ways that felt critical to the Children and Young People's Lab success specifically in the set-up process from start to finish. This is about the attention given to everything around and between the delivery week that meant that the week could be a success – in other words if time is taken between partners, and the administrative function is prioritised by all, the project delivery (in this case the Lab) is more likely to be successful. In visual art, the space around a sculpture, for example, is sometimes referred to as ‘negative’ or ‘empty’ space but

“By carefully manipulating negative space, artists can create a sense of volume, depth, and atmosphere.”⁴

In the context of making the week get off on the right foot, what happened before the week began (as well as what happened in it administratively and in the approach of partners) was critical to its success. The observation is that attention to what needs to be done paired with a coalition of the willing can, and in this case, did make a difference to the week. This acknowledges, that whilst some of this work isn't glamorous or visible, it was essential (and is essential to allow the space to be ready for the artists). This focuses on practical tasks (space booking, admin, contracting, sharing knowledge, finding late replacements, setting up school visits etc) which was undertaken by all involved without complaint and efficiently on all sides of the partnership.

“Collaboration is one of Z-arts values, and this partnership is a good demonstration of why that is. Each partner was able to play to their strengths, with Z-arts providing the space and local contacts. The wealth and breadth of different experiences gave a richness to the week which we wouldn't have achieved on our own.” Liz O'Neill, CEO and Artistic Director, Z-arts

⁴ <https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/the-art-of-form-and-space-in-sculpture>

Like-minded partners and generosity of time and space

Z-arts centre the needs of children and young people and their families – and at all stages, they wanted the best for this Lab, were ambitious for it, and made time and space in their busy schedules to support and accommodate it. This meant that everyone else (those who willingly attended the planning day, the lead artists, and VX) were then able to feel that it was possible. There was never a sense that the Lab was anything other than an opportunity to find some really important things out, to test some ideas, and to really trouble what making accessible theatre for children and young people is and can be.

This meant that the experience was shaped by possibility, focused on positive outcomes and what was needed, so the work could shape up. From sandwiches at planning days, a willingness to refine the Lab through meetings to conversations via emails at times that worked best for each with no expectation of immediate response if this did not fit with people's work patterns or access needs – all involved not only wanted the Lab to work but went the extra mile to make it happen. This extended to the week itself – finding someone to make a dog head at very short notice, to recruiting a technician at within hours without a hint of complaint. This practical and collaborative team approach meant the week could unroll without concern for things being barriers and recognised that to create a powerful partnership: it's important to recognise and put into place a variety of factors including the right people, and the right resources both financial, capacity and space.

“an appreciation of the human as well as economic and technical factors that intermingle to produce successful outcomes” (Krantz, 2001).

There's an element of shared philosophy at play too, and although it was never stated baldly there was a commitment to and belief in:

- An ambitious regard for accessible work for children and young people
- A benchmark for high quality work deserving of the best intervention, funds and equal to any other work
- A method of working that included children in genuine partnership

These three elements did not have to be defined because all those around the table used words like accessible, quality and co-creation with the same or similar meaning. For the avoidance of any doubt, the working meanings were:

Accessible Work:

"I love that being accessible meant that the work would be better creatively."

Artist

The making of accessible work is the antithesis of providing a service – it is a series of possibilities for creativity. This builds on Graeae's ideas of the Aesthetics of Access and is discussed later in the paper.

Quality:

Some children's work can sometimes be quite 'worthy' but the highest quality work starts with children and young people and applies the very best of practice in its development.

"an understanding of the children's world is vital to producing children's theatre that engages their audience. If we consider children's interest as paramount in children's theatre, we must delve deeper into children's world, to consider how they think, react to things in different situations and circumstances." (Dennis. E, 2019).

In other words, children need to be consulted, and who they are and what they want needs to be central and the highest quality practice in making theatre should complement this.

Co-creation:

"In my opinion, two sometimes opposing ideas: listening to children to create what they want to see AND making a piece that you find creatively stimulating and engaging with your own practice. Finding the middle ground between the two I think is the trick to creating a great piece of work for children and young people." Patch Middleton, Sound Artist

A notion of co-creation has become fashionable in theatre and theatre participation in the early part of the 21st Century, although there is not necessarily an agreed definition,

"the terminology surrounding arts participation is in a state of flux. There is no generally accepted set of terms to describe arts participation, but an evolving lexicon of words and phrases that describe how people encounter and express their creative selves and share in the creativity of others." Brown et al (2011)

Some definitions of ‘co-creation’ are ambiguous: sometimes seen as an exchange of ideas, other times ‘an exchange of creativity energy between an arts organisation and its public’ (Brown et al, 2011). In Children and Young People’s Lab process, there was an understanding that co-creation meant, ‘a collaborative process where multiple stakeholders actively participate in the development of a piece of theatre.’ In this instance, this included artists as well as children,

“It was brilliant to be able to create something with the audiences wants and needs as a foundation of the work. Too often theatre is created in a bubble and then shown to audiences for feedback to develop it - this started and ended with them, and that's how I wish all processes were!” Sarah Emmott, Lead Artist

“How the team worked so well together to make the show as much about what the children wanted and making it accessible as possible while having the most fun time with dedicated people.” Monique Jarrett, Performer

The artists brought their full skill set to develop the work that the children had contributed to from the beginning: the artists didn’t make the piece in a void, nor did anyone in the room compromise their talents to limit what was possible. As Walmsley (2013) suggests the co-creation process included ‘collaboration, interaction, invention, experience, value and exchange.’

“Start with the kids. The initial consultation with the two classes was invaluable for the team to learn what their needs were and be able to respond to that from the very start. How well this worked was evident from the reactions of the children when they saw the finished article - they had a real sense of ownership, and disbelief that the artists had taken their comments so literally.” Liz O’Neill, CEO and Artistic Director, Z-arts

The shared values of the partners and the artists meant that the Lab could deliver to its potential – these did not need to be explained to any of those in the room in part because those in the room had been carefully selected to deliver what was needed.

Assemble a crack team

“If all artists and creatives have their access needs met the space is richer, more equitable and ultimately creates an environment for better work.” Zoe Pickering, Head of Programming, Z-arts

"I think the main thing was that everyone involved was encouraged to add their own input and ideas, it felt like a very democratic devising process." Artist (anon)

"Having a mix of people in the room helped to create the accessible work I think because there was always someone around to see it from different perspectives and input if something didn't feel quite accessible to them. I love the use of integrated BSL and creative audio description. I could feel that it was a collaborative space which was great" Jessica Brigham, Lighting Designer

The second finding is 'assemble a crack team'⁵ which is a slightly flippant way of saying it is important that the people in the room are the right people, and the people needed to deliver what is wanted/needed. This included individuals with a range of skills and talents that the lead artists thought essential to develop and devise an accessible piece, and sufficient resource to pay for it. In addition to skills and talents as artists, creating a piece of accessible theatre through a devised process also required people who:

- Were willing and adept at risk taking in the rehearsal space and able to go with the flow
- Had complementary skills to one another, so that all bases were covered
- Were able to be playful, and had good interpersonal skills (e.g. collaborative, good communicators, able to adapt across the week)

Accessibility of the space

"Everything was created with access in mind for all the children with disabled artists. It meant the entire experience was accessible for them. The building is set up to hold this, even though the architecture meant we couldn't always travel in a group." Jennifer Jackson, Artist

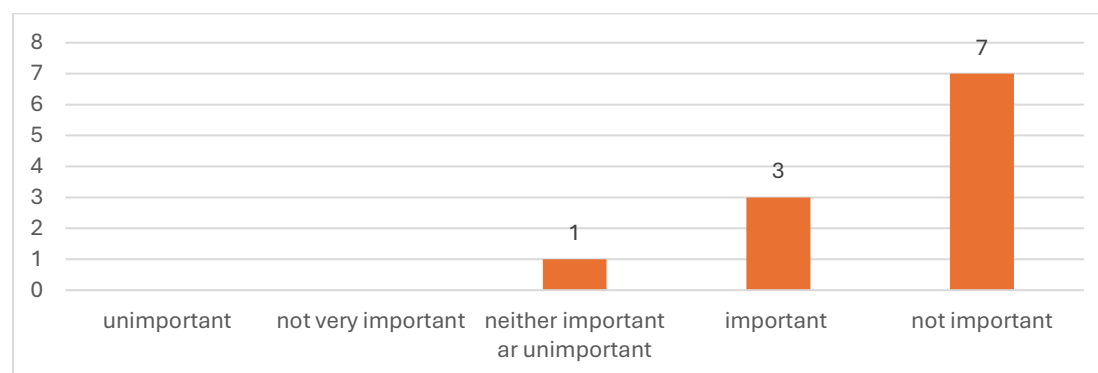
In addition, it was important that the team – both creative and acting – were well-supported, so the process was supplemented by the accessibility of the space (which was broadly very accessible), and that any relevant access needs

⁵ Whilst this could feel slightly exclusionary in that many of those in the room had established relationships with those leading, this was because developing a Lab requires a process of being able to hit the ground running. In normal circumstances of working through an audition and/or recruitment, there would be a process of determining clear ambitions, and understanding of method, and selecting those who can deliver against that criteria. The key here is that the ambition of the week was to have talented professionals with lived experience of being d/Deaf, Disabled or Neurodivergent. The truth is that there are many talented professionals excluded because of disability whereas this report and previous Lab reports makes it clear that creating a level playing field for everyone creates higher quality, fully accessible work.

were met (BSL interpreters, access workers). For the team 63.6% of the group (7) of artists felt the space was very accessible (see Fig 1), with 3 individuals or 27.3% finding the space accessible. The one person who felt that the space was middling in terms of accessibility was talking, broadly speaking, about coming into a space when relationships were already established. This is an interesting observation and recognises that some people might find it harder to feel part of the team if they enter later or at not there at the beginning. So, accessibility is not just physical and practical, there's an emotional dimension to it too.

“I realised I find it a bit difficult to join a new team who have already began collaborating and are in the peak of their work when I arrive, I feel a bit unsure on where to begin when joining this environment. But this has given me a clearer understanding of my own access needs I think.” Artist

Fig 1: How accessible was the space for you personally:



N=11 (7 equates to 63.6%, 3 to 27.3%)

The assembling of a crack team doesn't mean that everything has to be pinned down and decided in advance, indeed that level of detail may mean that the room doesn't flow or feel creatively open. Having the skills – exemplified by both Lead Artists – to hold an open space where ideas are welcomed, tried out for size and that encourages collective decision making in this case at least, allowed 'the crack team' to give of their best. Because the group genuinely had a common purpose, they were able to feel part of what they were making, and that their contributions mattered. People were able to say, 'what if?' or 'what then?' without worrying about being quashed. Neither of the Lead Artists were precious about the process, but held the space for others to move into,

“I can hold a room and support many people even if I don't have a concrete idea on what we will make. That I can bring together a good creative team and acting team. Working with Sarah was joyful and I'd love to do so again. I definitely learnt that I love making work for young people and also adding in

creative access really makes my brain work. I've made shows without it and it's not as exciting.” Nickie Miles-Wildin, Lead Artist

“We found our rhythm as a new group of creatives really quickly, and whilst I didn't learn this, it definitely reassured me that I have the skills to be able to lead and connect people on a project and provide a type of 'glue' in creative spaces that make people feel safe and comfortable.”

Sarah Emmott, Lead Artist

This did mean that they pushed themselves too hard at times, but the atmosphere in the room was a productive and iterative. And that was about having the right people in the room and honouring their lived experience.

Why lived experience matters

“Having the team in the room who are making the work be from the deaf, disabled and neurodivergent community meant that people had lived experience and a passion to make this work as accessible as possible. I also appreciated us all being able to share our access requirements before the job began and everyone being so kind and respectful towards each other’s needs.”

Paislie Reid, Performer

Lived experience, like co-creation, is often discussed in the participatory theatre processes in the making of theatre. Lived experience has two sides in story making – firstly it requires those who are creating work, have a lived understanding of the experience of those the work is about or in the case of this Lab, that those in the room understand because of their lived experience, what is needed and/or works in the creating of accessible work.

Creating work from ‘lived experience’ often, though not always, relates to the process of working with communities and creating stories around their life e.g. people who experience homelessness, or have lived experience of addiction. Creating work without centring this lived experience is problematic because it potentially commodifies stories that are not necessarily a part of the everyday life of the performers/makers which is then potentially compounded by sharing those stories with audiences, such that it becomes exploitative. There are often issues of power involved in that storytelling that sometimes exposes the vulnerabilities of communities even if the motive for doing so is intended honourably.

In many ways the notion of lived experience that underpinned the Children and Young People's Lab is that antithesis of this process. This was a Lab that proactively wanted the room to be representative and inclusive with **professional, talented** actors and creatives, who could bring their full selves to the process. Whilst there is some discomfort in putting those words in bold, it is necessary to make a point – there is a tension for all disabled performers/creatives that plays their brilliance against a tick box culture, in a world where disabled performers or creatives are frequently used in broader theatre industry for 'disabled' roles and conversely rarely used for roles that are predominantly not disabled.

The Lead Artists wanted a group of artists who were at the top of their game, and their lived experience was absolutely critical to that.

“Working with disabled creatives during the creative process is absolutely vital to ensure that lived experience is considered authentically. Inclusion in the creative process—not just the outcome, helps dismantle barriers and enriches the work with diverse perspectives.” Artist

That's not to say that non-disabled people can't make accessible work, but that when making accessible work for children, representation matters. And in making accessible work – the lived experience elevates and illuminates accessibility, seeing it not as an add on but as integral to the creative process, because it is.

In a later conversation one Lead Artist felt that the use of the term 'disabled-led' often signalled to the broader theatre industry that the work 'wasn't for them', that to those not in the know of understanding that term 'disabled-led' they'd think work would be about disability or disabled stories, or worse still 'inspirational' disabled stories that would compound the narrow beliefs of those with limited understanding. Nonetheless, jam packing the Lab with disabled, d/Deaf and Neurodivergent artists and creatives with lived experience meant the process had an extra level of power to tell a story as creatively and accessibly and authentically as possible and in a way that was integral and fun and served the story and not clumsy, or shoe-horned in.

Values-led emotionally intelligent Space

“True system change requires something deeper and far more personal than structural change – it demands emotional intelligence, empathy and genuine human connection. Yet, many collaborative efforts still operate from

mechanistic approaches that fail to engage the full humanity of participants.”
The Heart of System Change (2025)

The third finding is around the kind of creative space that is needed to really make change and to move forward the conversation about what accessible theatre for children is. The space was guided by ethical principles, and by a culture of respect, empathy and inclusion. One of the curious and interesting aspects of this finding relates to the fact that these things – the values that led to this emotionally savvy space - are integral to the people leading the room. They didn't need to be stated out loud by them. That's their modus operandi. That's how they live.

“Having a creative team who are part of this community and want to make this work as brilliant as possible and know that accessibility does not mean a compromise on quality. Having a great story the children know and love and having a designer, sound designer and movement director and BSL and Audio description consultant in the space as early made it possible.” Paislie Reed, Performer

The Labs are about taking the conversation further and making change if possible. So, what is the value of this kind of emotionally intelligent leadership, and how does it manifest? Why does it make change? It feels counterintuitive to say that it makes change because it is not trying too hard but in many ways this is true. Embedded from the beginning of the process as it was in the Children and Young People's Lab, access is not seen as a burden, but an opportunity.

“To have a space that is collaborative, fun, full of curiosity, has people with relevant lived experience in the room to feed into the creative access of the piece. That everyone buys into the importance of the work. That work for young people can be fun and joyous.” Nickie Miles-Wildin, Lead Artist

There is a habit through the funding system of the arts that often frames change by helpfully (and unhelpfully) setting out the kind of behaviours and changes that are needed to make theatre more inclusive. For many theatres and arts companies/organisations these then become a measure of success and failure, or mechanistic so that they are 'delivered' with little or no feeling attached, little or no self-awareness, or social awareness. They're also framed so that they're almost competitive, or worse, a narrative that can be adopted without actually shifting behaviours at all.

To really make change then, a values-led emotionally intelligent approach has to be felt, meant, and lived. It has to be integral. This approach shaped the Lab rehearsals, the delivery of the sharing, the inclusion of the young people, the audience experience which began the second they entered the building and throughout the delivery of the output. In turn an emotionally intelligent approach enabled the artistic leads to support those who needed it, creating a space that enhanced communication, mitigated resistance and promoted a happy ship. The learning here, is that advocating for such an approach has a potential to change the perception of creating accessible work into something that can enhance everyone's experience by seeing inclusion as a means of liberation. And, as is often the case within the Labs, to see creative access as an exciting proposition rather than something that burdens a creative process.

Emotional intelligence is

- Self-awareness, which includes an understanding of self and how that impacts on others
- Self-regulation, managing self in the space
- Social awareness
- Relationship management – respectful, rounded, collaborative⁶

One of the ways this emotional intelligence manifested was making reasonable adjustments,

“Being unwell and disabled is incredibly expensive. It’s daunting having to turn down work, not just from a financial perspective but I genuinely enjoy my job. I love meeting new people and I get a huge amount of fulfilment from doing what I do. Supporting me to be involved in the process remotely was hugely beneficial, gave me a distraction at a slightly scary time and meant I was still able to earn an income...In a year’s time I will remember how compassionate you were and how you mentioned you wouldn’t rescind payment and how seamlessly you supported me to work remotely.” Artist

An emotionally intelligent approach meant that the space was led ethically, allowing for equitable opportunities and understanding. As an example, framing how the children contributed was carefully considered so that they felt confident from the second they arrived in the space – which in itself built on their original interaction where they were ‘creative consultants’ indicating from

⁶ This chimes with the findings in previous Labs, particularly Decolonising Disability, whereby, emotionally intelligent practice tends to provide space for people to thrive, and allows those involved to bring their full selves to the process

the get-go that what the children had to say mattered and that they had an ownership of the work and a hand in the process.

“It was brilliant to be able to create something with the audiences wants and needs as a foundation of the work. Too often theatre is created in a bubble and then shown to audiences for feedback to develop it - this started and ended with them, and that's how I wish all processes were!” Sarah Emmott, Lead Artist

With a longer process more time would have been spent on the activities for the children before the show began nonetheless the activity that did take place from the moment the children arrived stemmed from their feedback and countered their discomfort at being in an unfamiliar space. This included an introduction to the characters and an activity in the foyer, special consideration of where they might sit with labels for chatty areas, and non-chatty areas identified in the seating plan etc. This allowed the children to feel empowered and part of the process. It extended what theatre was for and could be for the children, at their request, and considered their thoughts and ideas. When they took part in a Q and A at the end of the sharing, they did not hold back at all about their opinions.

The children’s feedback was:

- They liked to be able to choose where they sat to watch the show
- They would have liked more snacks
- They thought the head would be bigger
- They were less than certain about the trailer being ‘live’
- They would have liked more acrobatics
- The bomb should be a person.

The children were very positive about their experience at the show and were amazed by how many of their ideas were incorporated. Their overall feedback was,

“We should do more to make more people come. And the bomb should be a real person.” Child’s feedback

Abundance mindset

The fourth finding is a relative of some of the other findings in this paper, nonetheless worthy of its own section. This finding is linked to philosophy, as

well as resource, but it predominantly manifested itself in the mindset of those in the room.

Resources

“We're an arts centre with very limited resources (time and money), so VX taking the task of coordination and administration was really helpful for us. Knowing there was one main contact ...was really clear for everyone involved. Plus having a decent budget for the project enabled it to have a real rigour.” Liz O'Neill, CEO and Artistic Director Z-arts

In the current climate having sufficient resource to be able to deliver an abundance mindset is critical, and this Lab was properly resourced financially which enabled the talent in the room to be present. This is of course important particularly in a time of scarcity when many people are under pressure to cut their cloth according to ever reducing budgets. In real terms, arts funding has been shrinking⁷ given many arts organisations have been on standstill funding since 2007, with National Lottery Project Grants (NLPG) and NPO funding reducing. Anecdotally rates of success of NLPG are reported as being more challenging in the current climate which could be accounted for by many more applications being submitted, making the fund exceptionally competitive. As one NPO leader says in Restore the Arts Report, noted below,

“ACE suggests doing less, but are they really going to pay us 25% more for doing 25% less? That's the reality. If we were really serious about EDI [equality, diversity and inclusion], we would be doing 50% less and spending realistic money on access. ... Organisational resilience is low, so we live on a wing and a prayer that there are no unforeseen challenges that will lead to a higher risk rating and jeopardise our chances of future funding.” NPO Leader

Nonetheless, whilst having sufficient funding is no guarantee of delivering change (a rising tide does not raise all ships), or even the best work, it does help. Having sufficient funds can also put an unrealistic pressure on a situation and failure can also be the result, so whilst good resources are important, they're not a magic bullet. The reason that the Children and Young People's Lab was successful was not just because money was available, but because the money was spent on the right people, and the right set-up. Nonetheless, legitimately Liz O'Neill expressed the concern around the replicability of the process, and product delivered across the week,

⁷ <https://artquest.org.uk/research/restore-the-arts/>

"I'm aware of how much talent there was in the room, and what a luxury that was, both in terms of the different lived experience from artists with different additional needs, and also with the super-talented Nickie & Sarah. I'm concerned that this pipedream will only happen when you have artists of that quality and care leading a process, so wondering how we find ways of passing that on, whilst honouring the IP of the artists who created a wonderful thing."

Liz O'Neill, CEO and Artistic Director, Z-arts

The learning here is not that money is the only ingredient needed to create accessible, successful work for children and young people, and the process undertaken was equally – if not more so - about the abundance of the mindset of the lead artists and everyone else in the room. And that does have the potential to be replicable.

Mindset

Many of the artist involved in the week draw attention to the generosity of the space.

"The space/environment that the work takes place in needs to feel safe, welcoming, and relaxed so it allows the children and young people to engage as much or as little as they like. It feels important to spend as much time considering the audience experience and journey as it does the work itself. I think sensory & physical needs and flexibility in participation need to be carefully considered in order to cultivate an atmosphere where everyone feels they belong." Artist

But the 'mindset' is more than generosity – it's about seeing challenges as opportunities and especially in developing innovative solutions. This was critical to the success of the CYP lab. Within the space there was also a methodology of working that was open, collaborative and recognised that success wasn't one person's but a collective process. The idea of thinking on your feet, and holding the outcome lightly is also keenly felt,

"I can hold a room and support many people even if I don't have a concrete idea on what we will make. That I can bring together a good creative team and acting team. Working with Sarah was joyful and I'd love to do so again. I definitely learnt that I love making work for young people and also adding in creative access really makes my brain work. I've made shows without it and it's not as exciting." Nickie Miles-Wildin, Lead Artist

“That being in a room with fellow DDN creatives is incredibly nourishing - you have a shared understanding and shorthand with each other that you just don't have when you're the minority in a room and second guessing that people understand you, that you have to mask, or code switch.” Sarah Emmott, Lead Artist

In addition to this, the artist and consultants felt the collaborative process helped them deliver through,

“Regular check-in, (from facilitators) and realistic open honesty about how the process will run. They helped hold our expectations and manage our limited time.” Ada Evaram, Audio Describer

“Great, welcoming space with wonderfully collaborative people. Easy understanding of the ask and what was expected of us.” Patch Middleton, Sound Artist

The abundance mindset, put simply is in essence about setting up the space for possibility, creating space for people to move into, and clarity of expectation: it wasn't a free for all, but the outcome (which was definitely pressured) was held lightly so everyone could shine.

360-degree approach: looking all ways

The final finding is how centring the access process as practice requires those involved to take a 360-degree approach, metaphorically, to consider a multiplicity of access / inclusion creative approaches – the artists were able to apply this approach so that the picture was comprehensive through the provision of consultants in BSL and Audio Description for example, and through working with a range of artists with a lived experience of disability, neurodivergence, or being d/Deaf. The directors spent time focusing on the needs of all those in the room, as well as the young people who might see the show so that the final sharing allowed a way in, creatively, for everyone as much as was possible in such a short period of time.

There was a recognition that those in the room brought expertise, talent, and an ability to collaborate in the creative process, bringing their whole selves to that process. This chimes with Graeae's ideas around the **Aesthetics of Access** – an artistic practice that is also at the heart of Vital Xposure's creative output- such that access needs are drivers for innovation in the theatre making process.

“.. access needs can be explored from the jump on a project but can also provide fresh creative avenues that might not have been wandered down otherwise!” Patch Middleton, Sound Artist

Everything was about a productive outcome (against a reductive one) which is easier when the whole selves of the people in the space are able to contribute to that productive outcome.

“For me, access aesthetic is the understanding that accessibility practices both remove barriers and contribute to the creative vocabulary of a work.”
Veronique West, in the ‘centre cannot hold’⁸

In essence, the Children and Young People’s Lab employed integrated access namely that the key elements of access are included (integrated BSL interpretation, Audio Description and captions), and integral to the creative process.

Daryl Beeton explained this brilliantly in a Spotlight article⁹, using an analogy around children’s playgrounds. As he says, playgrounds are meant to be fun, so simply providing ramps so that children who use wheelchairs can get to the top of a climbing frame is not in the spirit of why playgrounds exist. A ramp doesn’t push the child or allow it to feel the risk and excitement in climbing to the top.

In relating this to the CYP Lab, the access elements of the story were delivered so that they remained as exciting as the story overall delivered through access married to conventional theatrical practices, in essence marrying form to function so that it pushes forward what’s possible. This very much leaned into the process refined by Graeae over many years. As Jenny Sealey, AD of Graeae notes,

“Graeae is interested in performing stories in an accessible way, putting access at the heart of every commission process. From idea to page, to stage, the route to integrated access challenges and drives our new work. Graeae models, motivates and navigates social change by artistically exploring the functional conventions of accessible performance.” (Sealey. J, 2012)

In other words, conventions of accessible performance are a starting point that if used imaginatively and thoughtfully, can create something that is not only

⁸ <https://www.centrecannothold.com/blog/west-1>

⁹ <https://app.spotlight.com/news-and-advice/graeae-theatre-company-the-aesthetics-of-access/>

aesthetically pleasing, but readily available for everyone, regardless of specific access needs.

Artists' Survey

The artists involved in the week were asked to identify what they considered the most important aspects of making accessible work were. 11 creatives filled in the survey, which is all of the artists who were in the core team.

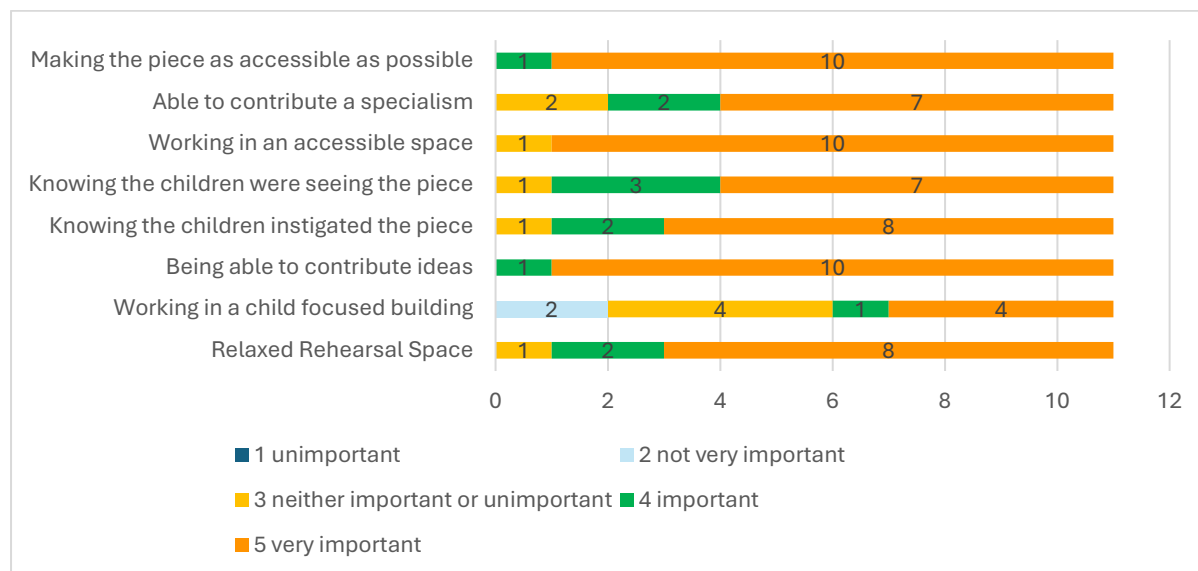
91% of the artists (10/11) felt that the key ingredients of making accessible work was 'feeling able to contribute' and 'focusing on making the work accessible'. In other words, 10 out of 11 artist felt that these two things were very important. 1 artist felt that 'feeling able to contribute' and 'focusing on making the work accessible' were important to the process. Similarly, 10/11 (or 91% of artists), felt that 'working in accessible space' was important to creating accessible work. One person felt this was 'neither important nor unimportant.'

8 out of 11 of those in the room felt that having a 'relaxed rehearsal space' was very important to creating accessible work (72% of those in the room). 2 people felt a relaxed rehearsal space was important, whilst 1 person thought it was neither important nor unimportant. A similar spread was delivered in answer to 'being able to contribute a specialism' with 7 people feeling this was very important, whilst 2 felt important, and one neither important nor unimportant.

The role of the children in creating accessible work for them was poorly shaped by the researcher e.g. 'How important to you were the following aspects of the week in creating accessible work?' when it should have perhaps included the words 'in creating accessible work for children'. Nonetheless, the role of the children was clearly valued by many of the artists involved. 8 out of 11 of the artist felt that knowing children had instigated the piece was very important, with 2 feeling it was important. One person felt it was neither important nor unimportant. Similarly, 7 out of 11 people felt it was very important that the children were coming to see the work, whilst 3 people thought this important. Again, one person felt it was neither important nor unimportant that the children were coming to the see the finished sharing.

The most surprising answer in the survey was where the work took place. The fact that it was in a building that was specifically focused on children produced a mixed bag of answers, 4 thought it was neither important nor unimportant, 4 thought it very important. One person thought it was important. 2 people thought it was not very important.

Fig 2: How important were the following aspects of the week?¹⁰



Final thought

This was a very short lab – with much accomplished over four days. The team gelled quickly, and everyone knew their role and felt able to deliver. It is also true, as one artists wistfully suggests,

“I think that what we were able to achieve in the time was great, but we had so many more ideas that could have made it even better if we had more time. I think there's definitely opportunity for further development.” Artist

This was a sentiment shared by ALL artists in the room.

Summary of Findings

The Children and Young People’s Lab was a highly successful and joyous week that produced an accessible, high-quality piece of theatre. Its success rested on several interlinked “ingredients” that together created the conditions for high quality, accessible work. Central to this was that the **artists, many with lived experience of disability, difference and neurodivergence**, shaped and drove the process with authenticity, care, and integrity.

¹⁰ In percentage terms, and as an example, 10 artists out of 11 deeming ‘making the piece as accessible as possible’ represents 90% of those involved. 7 artists out of 11 feeling that contributing a specialism was very important represents 63% of those involved. Of the remaining numbers 1 responsee = 9% of the group, 2 responsees = 18%, 3 = 27%, whilst 4 = 36%. Finally, 8 responsees = 72%.

Key Findings

1. Interstitial Spaces Matter

- Success depended not just on the week itself, but on the unseen, practical preparation (admin, contracting, coordination, school visits, logistics).
- Care for these “spaces between structures” ensured the week ran smoothly and set the right tone.

2. Like-Minded Partners & Generosity

- Collaboration with Z-arts and other partners provided ambition, local contacts, resources, and goodwill.
- Shared values (accessibility, quality, co-creation) created a common language and a spirit of generosity that enabled positive outcomes.

3. Assemble a ‘Crack Team’

- The right people with complementary skills, creativity, and openness were essential.
- Access needs were met, making the space equitable and creatively richer.
- Accessibility extended beyond physical adjustments to include emotional inclusion and team integration.

4. Why Lived Experience Matters

- Disabled artists brought authenticity, creativity, and passion to accessible work.
- Their presence shifted access from being an “add-on” to being integral to the process.
- Representation elevated the work and avoided tokenism.

5. Values-Led, Emotionally Intelligent Space

- Leadership and process were guided by empathy, respect, and inclusion.
- Emotional intelligence (self-awareness, social awareness, collaboration) shaped a supportive and liberating environment.
- Children were empowered as genuine co-creators, with their feedback taken seriously.

6. Abundance Mindset

- While sufficient funding was important, the mindset of generosity, openness, and innovation mattered most.
- Challenges were reframed as opportunities, with collective ownership of outcomes.

7. 360-Degree Approach to Access

- Access was integrated from the start (BSL, Audio Description, lived experience expertise).
- Accessibility was both functional and creative, expanding artistic possibilities rather than restricting them.
- This reflects the “Aesthetics of Access” approach where access enriches the creative vocabulary.

Conclusion

The Children and Young People’s Lab showed that **accessible theatre for children is not a compromise but an enhancement of creative practice**. By embedding lived experience, strong partnerships, emotional intelligence, and integrated access at every stage, the Lab demonstrated that accessibility could drive **innovation, joy, and quality**. The result was not just a successful sharing, but a model of how future work can be made: **authentic, collaborative, and artistically ambitious – with children and young people at its heart**.

The Children and Young People’s Lab demonstrated that accessibility in theatre is not merely a logistical requirement or an ethical consideration, but a profound source of creative enrichment. The process revealed that when lived experience, collaborative partnerships, and integrated access are woven into the very fabric of theatre-making, the result is not only inclusive but also artistically ambitious, innovative, and deeply joyful.

The Lab highlighted that success in creating accessible theatre is contingent upon a constellation of factors working in harmony: the meticulous attention given to preparation and interstitial spaces, the alignment of values among partners, the assembly of a skilled and diverse team, and the presence of leaders who embody empathy and emotional intelligence. These elements, taken together, created a fertile ground for artistic experimentation where children were not passive recipients but active co-creators, shaping both the process and the product.

One of the most significant lessons from the Lab is the recognition that accessibility is not a constraint to be managed but a catalyst for artistic growth. By embedding practices such as integrated BSL, audio description, and inclusive rehearsal methodologies from the outset, the Lab underscored the principle that the “Aesthetics of Access” can expand the creative vocabulary of theatre. This redefines access as a creative tool that can transform both performance and audience experience, ensuring that no one is excluded while simultaneously elevating artistic quality.

Equally important was the emphasis on lived experience. The Lab showed that when disabled, d/Deaf, and neurodivergent artists lead the process, accessibility moves beyond tokenism and becomes an intrinsic part of artistic authorship. Representation was not symbolic — it was integral to authenticity, integrity, and the capacity to innovate. The result was work that resonated with both the children in the audience and the professional community observing the process.

The findings also draw attention to the importance of mindset. While financial resourcing was an essential enabler, it was the abundance mindset of the artists, facilitators, and partners that allowed challenges to be reframed as opportunities and created a spirit of generosity in the room. This mindset ensured that the space was not only practically accessible but emotionally and socially inclusive, giving everyone—children, artists, and partners alike—the chance to contribute meaningfully.

Ultimately, the Lab provided a model for future practice that is both replicable and scalable. It offers the sector a powerful reminder that accessible theatre for children and young people should not be considered a specialist niche or an optional enhancement, but the foundation of excellent practice. If theatre for young audiences is, as the Royal Shakespeare Company asserts, among the most important work in the field, then ensuring that such work is accessible, inclusive, and values-led is not just desirable but essential.

Some Recommendations for the Sector

1. Integrate Access from the Start

- Build access (BSL, captions, Audio Description, sensory considerations) into the creative process, rather than retrofitting.
- Treat access as an artistic driver (“Aesthetics of Access”), not an add-on.

2. Prioritise Lived Experience

- Ensure disabled, neurodivergent and D/deaf artists are central to creative teams, not just in representation but in leadership and authorship.
- Value their expertise as both authentic lived experience and professional skill.

3. Value Interstitial Work

- Recognise the importance of preparation, admin, and logistics (“the spaces between structures”) in enabling accessible practice.
- Resource and acknowledge these tasks as essential parts of the creative process.

4. Foster Strong Partnerships

- Collaborate with like-minded organisations who share values around accessibility, quality, and co-creation.
- Build coalitions of support where partners contribute resources, networks, and ambition.

5. Assemble the Right Teams

- Recruit artists with complementary skills, openness to play, and a willingness to collaborate.
- Ensure access needs of all artists are met to create equitable, creative spaces.

6. Create Emotionally Intelligent Spaces

- Lead with empathy, respect, and inclusion.
- Frame children and young people as genuine co-creators, empowering them to influence process and product.

7. Adopt an Abundance Mindset

- Even within financial scarcity, foster generosity, openness, and flexibility.
- See challenges as creative opportunities and encourage collective ownership of outcomes.

8. Measure Accessibility Broadly

- Recognise that accessibility is not only physical but also emotional and social.
- Pay attention to how latecomers, newcomers, or marginalised voices are welcomed into teams and processes.

9. Embed Co-Creation with Children and Young People

- Place children's voices and ideas at the heart of the work.
- Treat consultation not as tokenistic feedback but as a foundation for devising.

10. Advocate for Structural Change

- Push for commissioning models and funding frameworks that make accessibility a contractual imperative, not an optional extra.
- Share toolkits, models, and learning openly to avoid duplication and accelerate sector-wide progress.

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