**I’m Me Podcast**

**Episode 1: Exploring Inclusive Research**

**Kelsie Acton, Daniel Foulds, Zara Mallinson**

**Kelsie:**

Hello, I'm Kelsie and I'm a postdoctoral researcher with the Institute for Social Justice at York St. John University, and I'm working on the I’m Me project. I'm Me is a creative research project that aims to amplify the voices of learning disabled and autistic artists by exploring questions of identity, representation and voice. The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and partners with six disability arts companies across the UK. Importantly, I’m Me is a collaboration with Mind the Gap. And for me, the most important part of this collaboration is the involvement of two of the Mind the Gap artists as peer researchers. So today, I'm talking to Dan and Zara about their work on I'm Me. Let's start with what are your names and pronouns?

**Zara:**

Zara Mallinson, and my pronouns are she and her.

**Daniel:**

I'm Daniel Foulds and my pronouns are he/him.

**Kelsie:**

And Kelsie, my pronouns are she and her. So, what kinds of disability language do you use for yourself?

**Zara:**

I say I've got a learning disability.

**Daniel:**

I say that I am a researcher and writer with a learning disability.

**Kelsie:**

And I would call myself a neurodivergent person. So, tell me what I’m Me is.

**Zara:**

I’m Me is about identity. It's about who you are and what you are. We looked at things like voice and identity, and we're making Doodle Books. They are for artists to talk about their live stories. We're going to do a festival in York in June 2025.

**Kelsie:**

Dan, do you want to build on that?

Daniel:

Yes, there are three elements to the research parts at this current stage of I’m Me of identity, representation and voice. And we're exploring the various different things with the artists currently. And we have just finished looking at representation and we'll be looking at voice in the new year. And I have been working alongside you, Kelsie, with interviewing the six partners. Actually, correction, seven partners because the Mind the Gap Academy is also a part of the partners now whilst the artists are the trial and error section of trying to create the Doodle Book.

**Kelsie:**

Dan, you mentioned Doodle Books. Can you tell folks what Doodle Books are?

**Daniel:**

Doodle books are creative stimulus, ways for us to get creative and explore various themes about ourselves with identity. We look at various elements of what, who we are and the book for that particular subject, examines things such as looking your age and life experiences leading up to how you are currently. Where home is for you, that sort of thing. Representation is looking at how we feel that we are represented in the wider world, and also around us as well.

**Kelsie:**

Tell me how these, all these disability arts companies around the UK will use the Doodle Book.

**Daniel:**

They will explore the books into whatever way they see fit. One of the beautiful things about, I’m Me, is that it's not a structured, structured way of doing things. It is very much a different kind of way of being able to explore things, it's not set in stone. It's permission for you almost to be creative in whatever way or form you want to be.

00:03:56 Kelsie

So, Mind the Gap develops these Doodle Books, and then we send them out to all these various companies around the UK and they make artistic responses based on that. Is that a fair summary?

Daniel

That’s a fair summary, what me and you have done, me and Matthew, Matthew Reason have been doing is interviewing the various partners and seeing how they're doing, how they’re faring in their journey with the Doodle Book. And also, see some of the amazing art that they've managed to do soft art.

Kelsie

Zara, how did you start working on the I’m Me project?

Zara

I've got an e-mail and thought oh, they could be interesting for me to do. I didn't know much about identity and I thought it would be good to learn more about it. I did the application on my own and then did an interview for the job.

Kelsie

And what's your role being so far on the I’m Me project?

Zara

So far, I've worked with the artist on Mondays and Wednesdays where I led some games and supported Vicky and Bee, who are facilitators. I’m working with Mind the Gap Performance Academy now when they're doing the activities in the Doodle Book.

Kelsie

Dan, you've talked a little bit about what you're doing on I’m Me - you've been helping with the research side of things by doing interviews with Matthew and I. But can you tell me how you started working on the project?

Daniel

I was interested with the project because I was aware of the application for the funding. For a year or two before it, it actually was confirmed we had the funding. And I am as a writer, I'm fascinated in looking at identity and how others feel they see themselves.

Kelsie

So, Zara, what's your favourite memory of working on I'm Me so far?

Zara

We came up with work to tell people about their rights in research. Things like it's OK to say no and you have the right to support. Me and Daniel helped write the script for the video to tell people about their rights. This was my favourite part so far.

Kelsie

What about you, Dan?

Daniel

This is a very hard, hard answer because there's been multiple different things about it. I suppose my number one stand out memory has been when we had the big get together on the 13th of September where we met everyone from all the, within the project itself. In the Mind the Gap theatre and we finally got to kind of see and learn a little bit about each other's creative practise. I find that fascinating, personally to see how - and then you kind of get an idea or at the very least an instinct on how they may start to explore different ideas.

Kelsie

So, Zara, has your role changed at all over the last six months?

Zara

My role has changed from supporting the artists going into Performance Academy, and I feel more confident. I've noticed a big difference in me about speaking up more.

Kelsie

Dan, how's your role changed over the last six months?

Daniel

My role has changed due to how I'm learning new skills and new, almost new ways of being able to work myself, in a more accessible way. Really, one of the things I've discovered is I don't - I feel like I can be more confident in saying that I don't have to have an answer ready there and then. And that's been a real self-discovery during the I’m Me project. And having a note pad and paper for example has been a big step in terms of being able to realise that. And as a result, I feel like I can feed into the meetings more. My role changed slightly when we're doing the debriefs in the, at the end of sessions when we're exploring the Doodle Book where I can summarise what we've learned, what we've done during the day. And be helpful in a in a way that I wouldn't have been prior to doing I’m Me. And also because I'm working alongside yourself and Matthew with the data collections. I've never done that process before and that has been a fascinating process to do and continue to do.

Kelsie

One of the big principles of inclusive research is that learning disabled people should be involved in every single stage of the research process. But in practise this can be pretty hard to do. So, when have you felt most included in I’m Me?

Zara

Me, I felt most included on a Monday and a Wednesday in the artist session and then in planning meetings too. I felt really clear about my role and everybody made room for me to speak, and I felt welcomed.

Daniel

For myself, I feel like when doing the interviews with the various partners has been fascinating. Going into a bit more detail about what we actually say in in those cycles, we have a prearranged list of questions that we asked and, but it also gives time for us to ask questions in amongst. And I feel very welcomed in order to actually be able to ask questions if there's something that isn't clear in my mind or hasn't been said on the record. And one other thing is from the back of that, being able to learn skills on how to analyse those interviews and find the common themes that are being said across the board. Of course, it's very similar to how we create theatre in many, many different ways and being able to do that on a more on an academic way has been fascinating on a skills basis.

Kelsie

And when have both of you felt least included?

Zara

I felt confused about my role when I first started I’m Me with the Performance Academy because it was very new for me and the team are working it out together, so I'm properly prepared.

Daniel

Sometimes during very, the more mundane meetings of planning can sometimes feel a bit - I'm uncertain on what to say and what to input. Pure purely because we we've got a formula that we like to stick to, and that's and, it keeps us on point, and I completely understand that that is very much needed for things to actually happen. But sometimes it is quite hard to be able to say or add anything unique that makes you feel like you're actually helping the process in any way, shape or form. Yeah, or not and not necessarily make you feel like you're another body in the room.

Kelsie

That’s pretty fair. Is there anything you've learned from the differences between when you feel really included and when you don't feel included?

Zara

Well, I've learned quite a lot, actually. I've learned that I can speak to people how I'm feeling and that it's helped me to do that.

Daniel

I suppose being able to have a ready answer, I think is a very clear thing for me to be able to be able to give you an honest statement and not something that's prearranged in the back of my head that seems very generic. And one thing I will say about the process so far is I can certainly feel, feel free when I can say, when the difference actually is, and that that will be taken on board. It just sometimes takes a bit of time to articulate it. I think it's also something that just for the record that I just thought I'd state.

Kelsie

Yeah, I'm having a moment where I'm trying to stop my brain from going to solve the access problem and trying to stick to the - [laughs]. So did you know any of the people working on I’m Me before you started working on it?

Zara

I knew Matthew and everybody from Mind the Gap, but I didn't know you, Kelsie.

Daniel

For myself, I knew Matthew, I knew the wider team for Mind the Gap and the Academy. I also knew Jo and Grace from Confidance, from working with them on other projects.

Kelsie

Dan, I know you've had past experiences with doing research. How is I’m Me similar or different?

Daniel

Just building on what I was saying earlier on, I think the fact I can feel more comfortable stating what my access is and being able to explore that as a part of my identity, has been really helpful for my own creative practise. And that, in itself, whether or not it's the success or not a success in the eyes of whatever we report, personally is a success. Another element of things is just being able to learn new skills in a more accessible way, which typical academia doesn't necessarily allow for. And that in itself, is a real credit to the project.

Kelsie

That makes me really happy. Thank you. Zara, do you have any advice for research teams that include learning disabled people?

Zara

It’s really helpful when people have been supporting me. We have check ins at the start to see if everyone's OK and we have debriefs at the end to talk about what happened. Mine and Daniel's roles have changed to what they were before at the start of I’m Me because we're both interested in different things, which has helped me a lot.

Daniel

I think my advice is just have fun and explore different ways to working together and just be open minded really. I mean that's the only thing I would add to what Zara has already said.

Kelsie

Is there anything I should have asked you?

Zara

No, it's all right to say no.

Kelsie

[Laughs] Very true. It is always all right to say no.

Zara

Yep.

Kelsie

Thank you. To anybody listening to this or reading the transcript for your time and attention. This is one of a number of podcasts that we'll explore. I'm may thank you to Mind the Gap, especially Carolyn, Jonathan Brown and the School of Arts at York St. John for the technical support. We appreciate you all.

[Bright piano chords and the long shhhh of a rain stick fade in and then fades out.]