**I’m Me Podcasts**

**Episode 2: Tackling Serious Topics Part 1**

Jess Boyes, Alison Colborne, Matthew Reason

Matthew:

Hello and welcome. This is a short podcast recording as part of the I’m Me project, which is run between York St. John University and Mind the Gap. My name is Matthew Reason and I'm the principal investigator in the I’m Me project and I'm joined here by Alison and Jess who will introduce themselves in a moment. This is one of a number of conversations we're having to capture elements of the research project as we're going along and to get the different voices that are involved from the research, from the artists, from the arts organization side, so we can kind of capture and share the learning from the project as we're going along with different audiences. So, as I said, my name is Matthew. I'm a professor of theater at York St. John University and I've been working with Mind the Gap for a number of years. Really interested in exploring with them, various questions relating to learning disability theatre and the arts. I’m Me in particular, looks at questions of identity, representation and voice using creative research methods to explore that with both Mind the gap and six other arts organizations around the UK. So we’re joined today by Alison, if you'd like to introduce yourself.

Alison:

Hello, I’m Alison. I’m one of the artists at Mind the Gap.

Jess:

Hi, I'm Jess, I'm Mind the Gap’s artists and partnerships producer, which means I work really closely with our team of artists on developing their ideas on their own artistic development. And on the I’m Me project, I'm making sure that the conversations that the artists having about identity, representation and voice are feeding into the rest of Mind the Gap's creative work.

Matthew:

So, as we've mentioned now, we've kind of repeated a couple of words there: identity, representation, and voice and those are the questions I guess that we're exploring within the I’m Me project. Inevitably asking questions about that means that at times the questions and the conversations we're having can be sensitive or personal. And they have the potential, not that we necessarily want to go there, but they have the potential to raise upsetting memories. They're often things that people find it hard to talk about, or to find the right language to talk about them. And they might therefore be topics that perhaps sometimes are avoided, because we avoid difficult things. Maybe particularly avoided in the context of people with learning disabilities. Perhaps seen as too sensitive too tricky, too dangerous. However, both within the I’m Me project and within Mind the Gap, as a company, we believe that it's important that they are discussed and are explored in creative and meaningful ways. And that's the conversation we're going have today with Alison and Jess. Starting with you, Alison. The first question is, why do you think it's important that potentially challenging questions about identity are discussed with people with learning disabilities.

Alison:

So what's interesting is, nobody can understand identity just by looking in a dictionary and finding it's definition of identity. It’s only by exploring it that we can understand it and hopefully become a more rounded person as a result of that. Learning disabled people are marginalized by society and by that perspective they stand to benefit more than most people by exploring the idea of identity.

Matthew:

So, in some ways there was two elements of benefit for you. You're thinking that one is as an individual and understanding yourself, and the other is as an artist?

Alison:

Indeed. They are both parts of me. What we have been looking at in our group is the idea of intersectionality. How one part is gender, there’s any religion you follow. Or none at all, because that’s an option. And there are many other elements that make us, us. But just exploring one of those elements doesn’t explore everything that makes you, you. So you need to explore all of it, the whole person.

Matthew:

 And Jess from Mind the Gap’s perspective, what are some of the things you've done to explore these questions with learning disabled artists?

Jess:

I mean, I think as Alison must say, it was about well, it is about, acknowledging that learning disability isn't the only part of a person's identity. So, finding really creative ways into conversations about identity more broadly. We've looked at all the different aspects of identity - race, gender, disability, faith. Finding accessible ways to understand the artists’ experiences alongside other people's experiences. Starting with conversations about identity and intersectionality was really important. And finding visual and creative ways to explore those things. So, we've done lots of watching stuff that we see in the media and in pop culture and reflecting on what we've seen, and what that says about how people tell stories about learning disability. Thinking about what it's like when learning disabled and autistic people tell their own stories versus what it's like when other people tell those stories. Which of those feels like a better representation? Alison, do you want to talk a little bit about the intersectionality pies that we made?

Alison

So, when we made these so-called intersectionality pies we were focusing on the protective characteristics of a person - age, race, gender, belief and few other things. Then we put all of these onto different coloured pieces of card and effectively created a pie with the different colour. The bigger chunk was the more it seemed a part of us. And if it didn’t quite ring for us that part might have been thrown out at that point in time. Simply because it didn’t feel like it influenced much how we did or did not live our life.

Jess

And I think that exercise of having a really visual thing that was made from building up understanding and kind of exploring subjects together, leading to being a kind of a practical visual thing that we can keep referring back to, keep thinking about, feels like it's been a really good way of us all developing that understanding together. So, I think that building up people's understanding, gradually, through kind of loads of different creative ways has been really, really important.

Matthew

So, it's viewing it not as a simple asking of a question and expecting an answer but as an active exploration over time and using different means to engage people with questions in different ways. So, Alison, to you again, do you think that people sometimes perhaps presume, that people with learning disability either can't or shouldn't explore these kind of questions?

Alison

Well, I believe a good part of that is the assumption to be aware of, which is that people assume that because we have a learning disability we aren’t actually that intelligent – not true. But because they assume that we often don’t often get involved in these types of discussions. And one thing is that we can’t be part of the solution. You just need to have to look at how the disabled community were excluded when they banned single use plastic straws. They were the only affordable way for some people to drink without any trouble.

Matthew

That's a very good example, isn't it, where the solution wasn't a solution for a really key part of the people affected by that. So you talk there about people maybe thinking that there isn't the ability to engage in these questions. Do you think those other things people worried about in terms of being sensitive or causing offense?

Alison

Well, that's is often for case when you explore something as delicate as identity because you never want to offend someone. But the thing is to just be honest and don't assume anything. And that’s about as good as you can, because the good intention is there and if you don’t assume you make it as open to people as you can be. You’re not saying, if you’re this you can’t be that.

Jess

We've done lots of really interesting work about assumptions, haven't we? And kind of unpicking assumptions that people have of learning disabled and autistic people. And stuff that that Mind the Gap artists have said is, oh people think we're happy all the time, or people talk to us like we're children, or people are really patronizing. So, I think some of that stuff's really informed how we work, hasn't it?

Alison

Yes. And that’s probably the reason people don’t come to us. Child-like. We’re not children, but it hints at lack of ability to learn again. And that kind of thinking is not helpful if you want us to be part of the solution.

Matthew

So, in terms of thinking of that, being part of the solution or a progressive way forward, one of the things that's core at Mind the Gap and the I’m Me project in this conversation is working together with both learning disabled artists and non-learning disabled creative producers or researchers. So, Jess, how does this play out in the exploration of difficult questions? What are the different roles and responsibilities? What are the different or mutual challenges and opportunities? What support is required? What's the role of Mind the Gap in exploring these questions?

Jess

I think well, as Alison was saying, a lot of learning disabled and autistic people aren't involved in conversations about these things at school or in kind of other settings. And aren't supported to explore those things and that doesn't mean people aren't capable or interested. It means that more traditional routes into those conversations aren't accessible to people. And they're not conversations that are being had in the right ways. And so, from a Mind the Gap perspective, Mind the Gap facilitators’ expertise is in making things accessible and engaging and breaking things down. And supporting people to build understanding in ways that's accessible to them. So we have high expectations of what people can do, and can achieve. And recognize that if people aren't getting something in the way that somebody's asking it, it’s because we're not approaching it in the right way rather than that that person isn't capable of having that conversation or understanding that thing. Also, in terms of creative process, it's about building environments where people's lived experience, people's professional experience are kind of value to the same and equally as important as to what you'll bring into that room. It's about making safe spaces where people can get things wrong and try things out, ask questions. And explore new ways of thinking that might be new to them. And that's both for learning disabled and autistic people and for non-learning disabled staff members it’s kind of exploring it together. Rather than a dynamic that's like we are teaching you this stuff. Its a place where you're exploring it together.

Matthew

So rather than the presumption that someone has the expertise or the knowledge, it's a neutral exploration in in that way.

Jess

Absolutely.

Matthew

And Alison, could you give me maybe a specific example of one of the ways you've been exploring and discussing these questions that's related to your own identity and sense of self. And how is this impacted on you?

Alison:

Or what if it was what we were given different scenarios which was being at an audition, which for us you could translate into a job interview, a first date and being at home. So these were the three scenarios. In each of those scenarios we were given an event that would happen in each of the scenarios and the thing was to observe how different people reacted based on that scenario. It was really interesting because in a really professional setting we would brush these things to one side. Because you really want to be the best you can be there. But at home there’s no limits. Family, they know the worst sides of you, and so you can say things, do things which you wouldn’t necessarily do in that settings because of who is around you and the context of what was happening. And that was interesting because you don’t always think about wearing a mask at certain events. But it’s true, you’re probably your true self with family and close friends.

Matthew

As opposed to, in an addition setting being the most professional self or expectation of what that should be.

Alison

We've super big expectations. Because you’re wanting to set a good example. You’re saying, you want to work with me.

Matthew

So, looking at that aspect of your identity has helped you understand how you are in different contexts and the different pressures that are on you.

Alison

Yes.

Matthew

Jess, what advice would you give to other arts companies who want to explore different questions with learning disabled participants?

Jess

I think taking the time is the most important thing. So, the time in terms of planning, the time in terms of planning in terms of building layers of understanding and repeating things and revisiting things. And not expecting exploring something once to be the only time that you need to do it. And it's about kind of building on, slowly building on work that you're doing. And by listening and responding and being happy to chuck the plan out of the window if it's not working, and the flexibility of finding new ways of exploring things and explaining things. The understanding that if somebody is not getting it, cause you're not explaining it right or you're not approaching it in a way that is right for them. Rather than it being about them not being able to engage in that conversation. And I think approaching it as you're learning and exploring something together. Rather than bringing in a kind of a dynamic of teaching or learning it's about exploration I think.

In terms of challenges about kind of exploring those difficult subjects. There's a lot for everybody. There's a lot of undoing really ingrained thinking that's been really embedded by what society teaches us, right? So that's kind of exploring new territory for everybody in a lot of in a lot of instances. And some things are really personal for people. So, this there's kind of challenges around responding to that at the time, and making sure that the right supports, the right support is there to be able to support people through those conversations and those explorations. And people realizing things all kind of realizing implications of things in their lives in different ways. And so that responding in the moment, but also responding more structurally thinking about what support and wellbeing stuff is built in for people.

That's been super, super important. I think there's also something really important about acknowledging that often the facilitators or the people lead in the session aren't disabled people themselves. So, making sure that there's ways as often as possible to bring in the voices of other disabled people who were doing really good kind of arts or activist stuff is really, really important.

Matthew

We've used the metaphor in some sessions about an onion, about peeling and onion and the different layers and breaking down the question into many, many different components and exploring them one by one, and building up that understanding as we go. And for you, Alison, the last question, what advice would you give other researchers - researchers such myself - wanting to explore difficult questions relating to learning disability.

Alison

I’d say, don't be scared about approaching us. Just go for it. By using plain English, instead of academic language, it doesn't just benefit for learning disabled community, but for wider community because there’s less jargon to worry about. And that’s one of the biggest problems you come across sometimes, is that jargon whcih isn’t just hard for learning disability people, but for wider people as a whole.

Matthew

But there's a, from your point of view, there's an interest and willingness to be involved in research if it's engaged, engaging and accessible.

Alison

Indeed. A little bit of work now into what can make things accessible can benefit a company for years and years to come.

Matthew

So that was really interesting and already a quick insight into some of the things we're looking at. So, as I said, we're doing a number of short podcast recordings like this about different aspects of the project. And hopefully in doing that kind of encouraging other people to do this kind of work in a sensitive and reflective but also ambitious manner as well. So thanks very much for listening.