

What is I'm Me?

I'm Me is about sharing our stories.

I'm Me is about learning disabled artists like us figuring out what we want to say.

It is about having control of our stories.

This festival is about sharing our stories with the world.



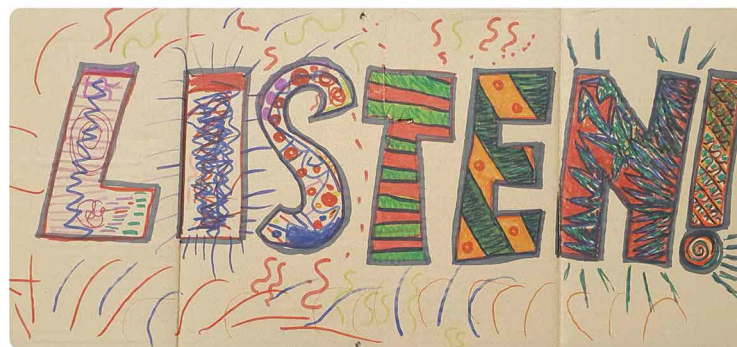
Luke Greenwood,
lead artist with Open Theatre.

Why is I'm Me important?

The world rarely listens to people with learning disabilities and autism.

- Politicians don't think about us when they're making decisions.
- When we go to the doctors, they speak to the person we came with.
- Even when we're just talking about our favourite TV show, people often don't listen to us.

But we have a lot to say. Often, we say what we want to say with our art.
This is what I'm Me does.



Placard from Mind the Gap.



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The Story of I'm Me

1: Starting Points

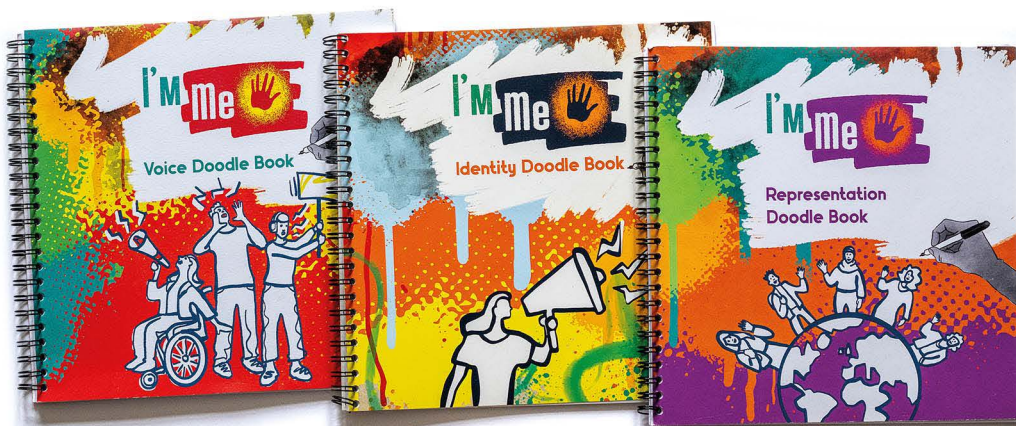
Mind the Gap and York St John University have worked together for a long time. In 2019 they developed the Creative Doodle Book, designed to support learning disabled and autistic artists to reflect on their practice.

2: Working Together

Artists at Mind the Gap said that they wanted to talk about identity, representation and voice. Together we decided that the Doodle Book would be a good way of doing this. Mind the Gap and York St John University talked to six other learning disability arts companies. In 2023 this group formed the I'm Me project.

3: Asking Questions

Artists at Mind the Gap asked questions about identity, representation and voice, finding ways of exploring them creatively. If the questions worked, we put them into a Doodle Book. We made one book for each theme of identity, representation and voice.



4: Thinking Creatively

Between 2023-25, these Doodle Books were used by the other six learning disability arts companies as a way to creatively explore ideas. We had lots of conversations and workshops about identity, representation and voice.

5: Sharing our Work

The arts organisations taking part in I'm Me were invited to create performances and art inspired by this process. This is what makes the I'm Me Festival in June 2025.



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Doing Inclusive Research

I'm Me is an inclusive research project

In order to be inclusive, people with learning disabilities and autism have to:

- Think the research is important.
- Be included in all stages of the process.
- Have the support and access needed to participate.
- Have some control over the project.
- Be able to understand the outcomes.

This is important to ensure research is relevant and truly reflects the learning disabled and autistic community.

How we worked together

Learning disabled and autistic artists have been involved in I'm Me in four ways:

As Research Assistants

Research assistants have helped plan every stage of this research.

- They've interviewed people.
- Helped design our approach to consent and ethics.
- Provided feedback to ensure people on the project say things clearly.
- Written articles and made podcasts.

As Lead Artists

Every company in I'm Me has had a lead artist.

- They've helped plan and deliver creative workshops.
- Taken part in interviews and podcasts.
- Attended project meetings.

Jack Mather, lead artist
with Under the Stars.



As Artists

In total almost 100 artists have been involved in I'm Me.

- They have used their creativity to share their experiences and opinions about identity, representation and voice.
- Their work is included within the I'm Me Festival.

As Decision Makers and Consultants

- A group of artists decided what work should be included in the Festival.
- Another group has been involved in developing the exhibition material.



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What is Identity?

Identity is all the things that are a part of you.

You might share some of those things with other people.

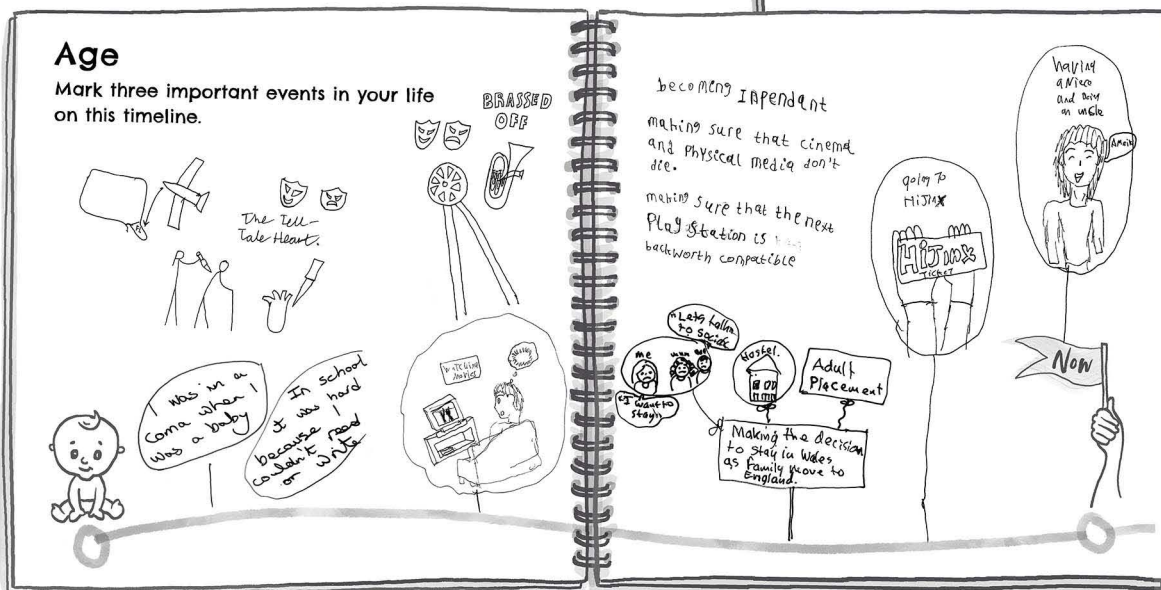
“ Identity is more than just what’s on the outside.
When people talk about identity, it’s just race, gender,
whatever. But it’s actually, yeah, a lot of it’s in your brain.
You are the one that makes you, you. ”

Sinead, Under the Stars

We used the Doodle Book to explore identity in all sorts of ways. Prompts included:

- Drawing ourselves aged 5.
- Writing a story about our shoes.
- Describing our perfect home.
- Making a timeline of our lives.

Artist's drawing
of their identity aged 5



This timeline is from several different artists at Hijinx.



Shared Experiences

When we talk about our identity we often tell stories about our lives. We discovered we often had similar experiences, which we hadn't shared before.

“ People were saying, how their sort of experiences were in similar situations. And it was really like you could see the connection with everybody. ”

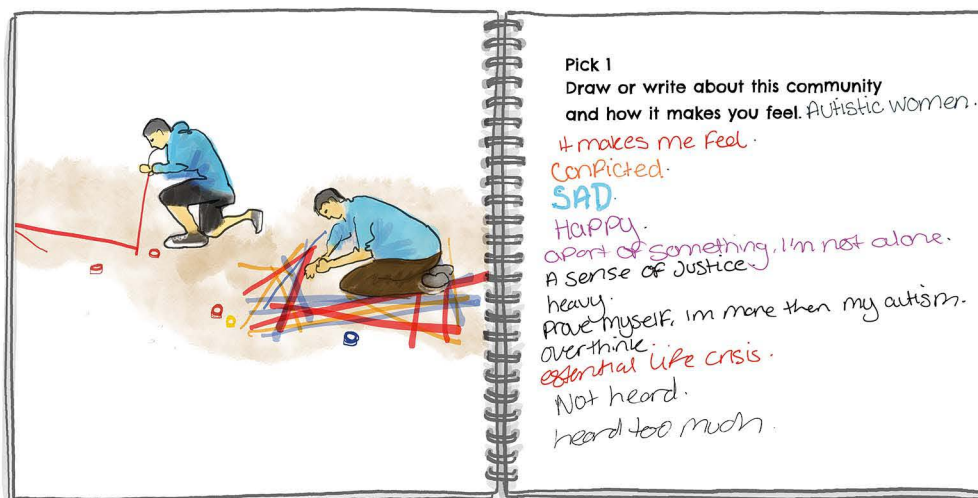
Luke, Open Theatre

To understand ourselves, we need other people.

Moments of shared experience were wide-ranging, but often were about feeling different or isolated. We shared experiences of:

- Bullying
- Feeling unsafe in public places
- Other people talking for us

We also had more positive shared experiences. Often these were about art or supportive communities. When we find out other people experience the same things we do, we feel connected and less alone.



Open Theatre exploring connections and isolation through non-verbal practice.



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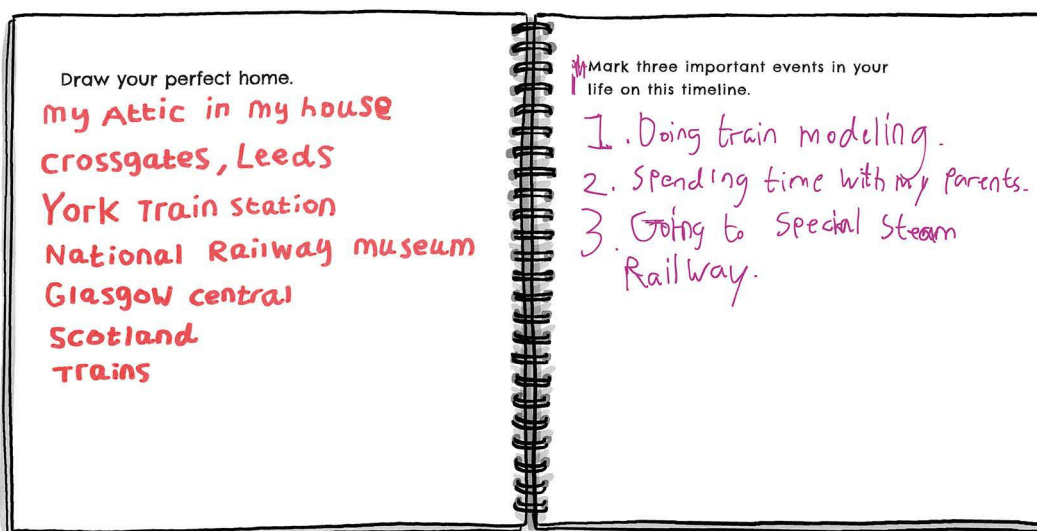


Joy

Part of what makes you, you are the things you love.

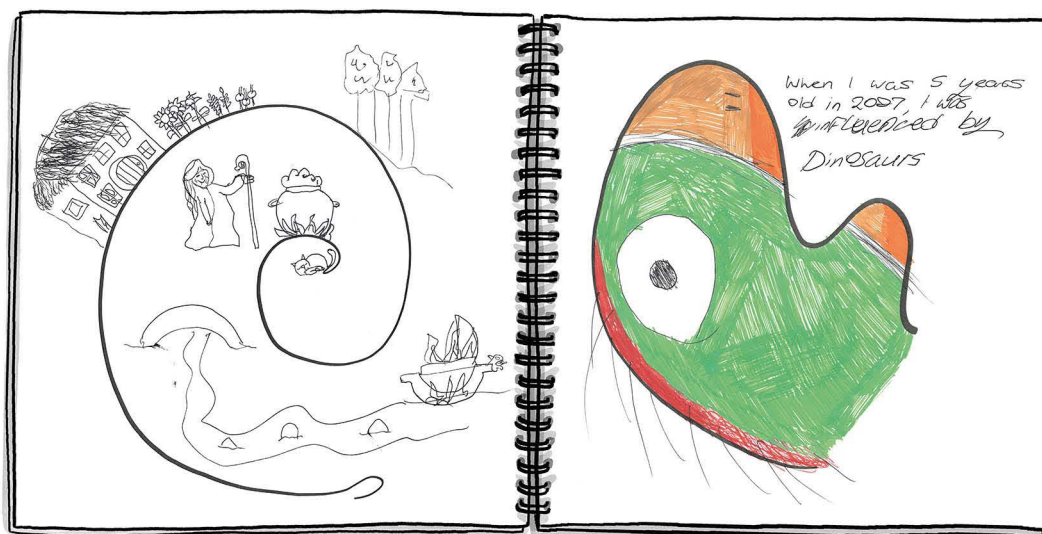
You are the things that bring you joy.

A few of the things that bring us joy are trains, witches, dinosaurs and Nintendo.



Often our learning disability is assumed to be a tragedy.

Our joy is a way of changing this story.



Pages from different artists' Doodle Books.



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Talking About Disability

One of our discoveries from I'm Me, is the valuable space it gave us to talk about disability.

“ No one talks about it. Everybody is just very quiet about it. I just think it's a shame. We need to be more open and just say, this is what I got, and this is how I function. I think people are just so ashamed of it. ”

Hannah, Confidence



People are worried about discussing learning disability. They feel they don't know how and sometimes describe it as 'upsetting'. This stops conversations even starting. If we aren't given space to talk about our disability, we lack the language to know ourselves and to challenge oppression.



What is Representation?

Representation usually means the kinds of stories the world tells about a group of people.

For example, are people with learning disabilities only on the TV if there is bad news?

Or are they always shown being happy and smiling?

“Arts on our TV screens and in our films is supposed to be reflective of our society. If large portions of society are being left out or ignored it's incredibly easy to believe that there are not many people who are having those experiences.”

Hijinx



Victoria Walters.
Lead Artist for Hijinx.

However, sometimes we feel like representation in film, TV and the news isn't that important to our daily lives.

“Just because we're seeing more people with disabilities in the mainstream media, doesn't stop people talking to me in a babyish voice.”

Under the Stars

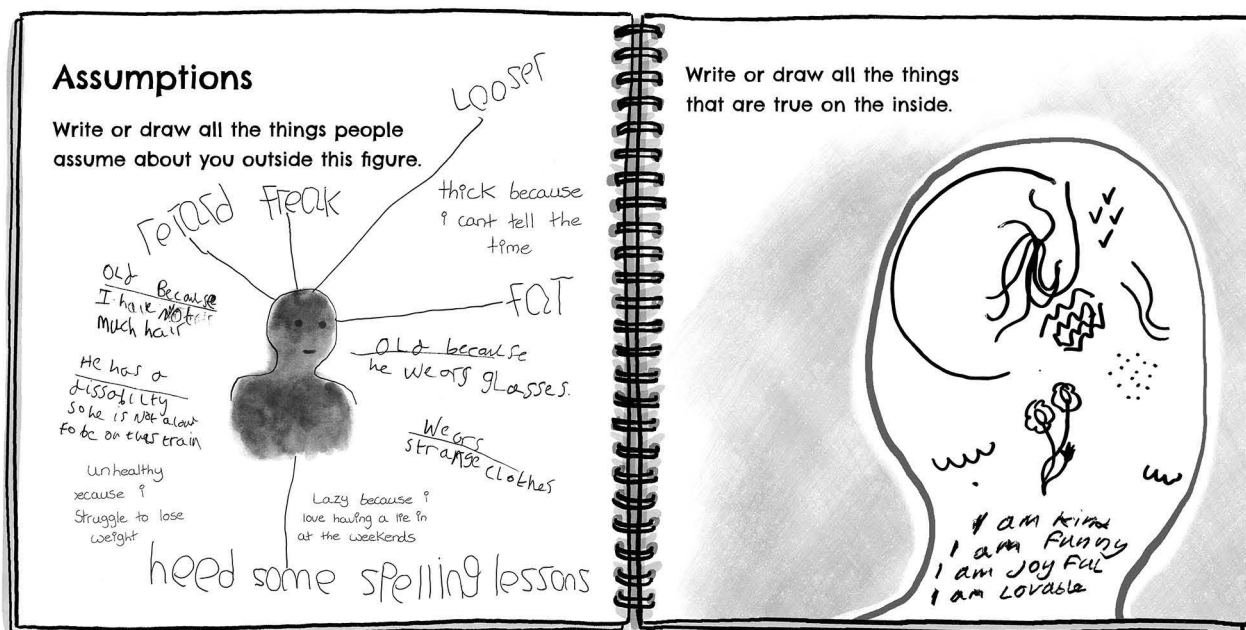


Assumptions

When people make assumptions they believe something without making sure that it's true.

Most people know you aren't supposed to make assumptions about people with learning disabilities. But we know from our experiences that people make assumptions about us all the time.

“ It was fairly easy for me to describe assumptions, like what people think about you when they first see you. ”
Under the Stars



These images are made by putting together different artists' Doodle Book pages.



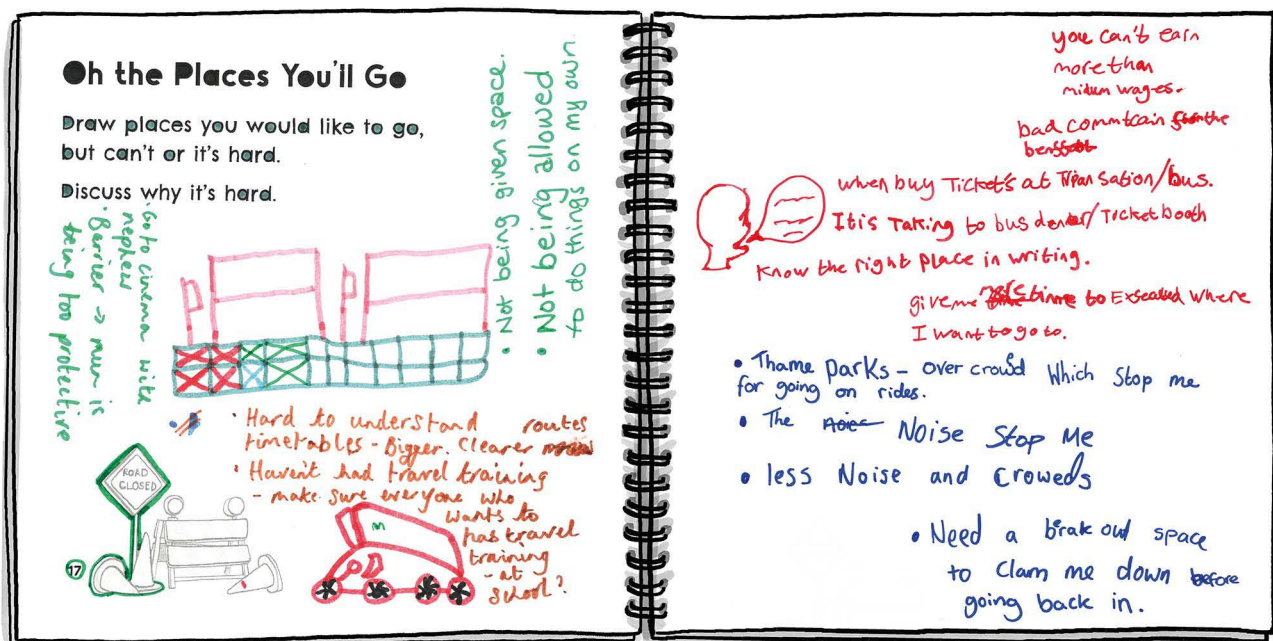
Being in Public

Being represented in public is important.

It's hard to go out and be in public when getting places isn't easy and places aren't accessible.

“ If you really want to go somewhere, how do you deal with the fact that someone's saying you can't go there because of this, this and this. ”

Gavin, Lung Ha



These pages combine the responses of several different artists discussing barriers to being in public.

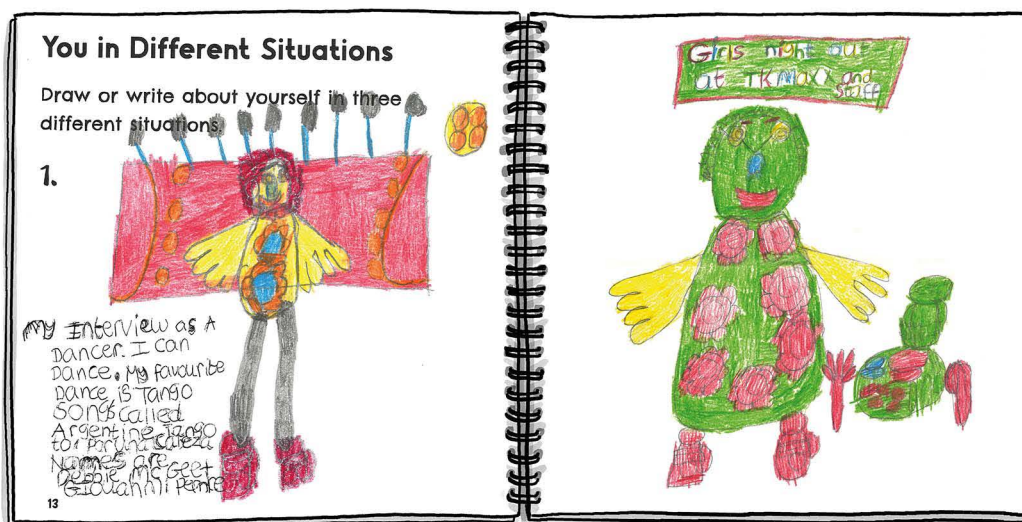
As a Mind the Gap artist puts it, 'You can't be represented somewhere if you can't get there'.



Art Making as Representation

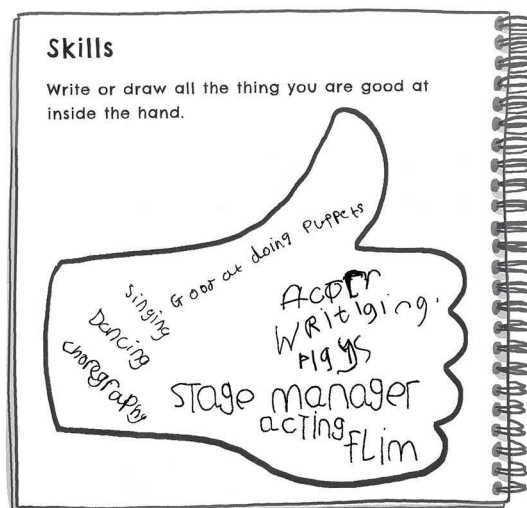
Representation is also about how we present ourselves to other people.

This might be how we dress, act, speak or move.



Drawings from About Face.

Or it might be through our art.
We want to be recognised for our skill and talent as artists.
We want to tell our own stories.
We feel most ourselves when we are making art.

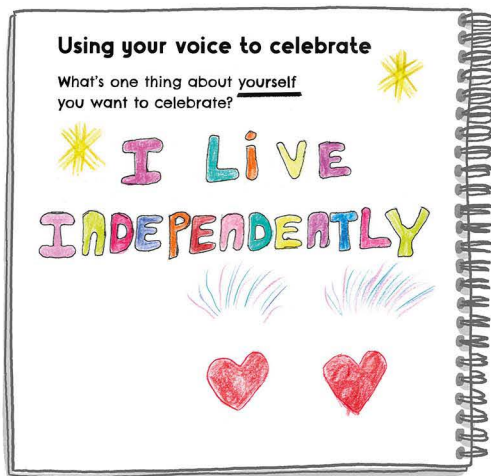


What is Voice?

Voice is what you want to say and how you say it.

We thought about:

- What is important to us?
- Who needed to hear us?
- How does it feel to use our voice?
- What happens if people don't listen?
- How can we use art to share our message?



Doodle Book page from About Face.

“ It was an opportunity for everybody to just say their bit. It's important to use your voice, not just to change others around you, but for your own self as well. ”

Lung Ha



We turned some of the ideas into placards.
Illustration Aimee Shepherd

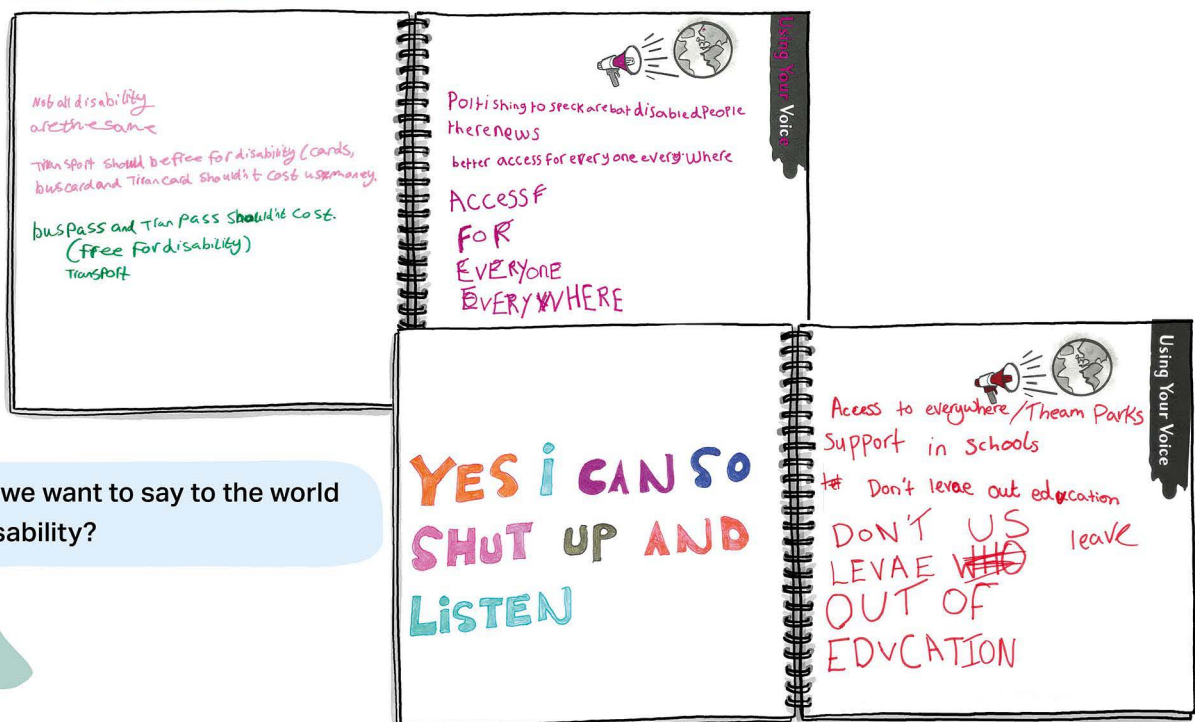


Challenging Ableism

We want to use our voices to change how disabled people are treated. We want:

- Better access
- Better education
- Free transport
- A stop to bullying
- People to listen to us

We want people to believe us when we say what we can and can't do.



What do we want to say to the world about disability?

“ We talk so much about change. We get really big about the world and how we can make things better. What can we change? But sometimes there isn't an answer to that. ”

Lung Ha



Speaking For and Speaking With

**We have lots of experiences of people speaking for us.
Sometimes people speaking for you is frustrating
because they don't say what you want to say.**

*You use my words like your own microphone.
A microphone that I do not hold or use.
My words feel muffled by your loudness.
My words feel tainted by your presence.
I mesh into the crowd, my voice is now yours.
I'm voiceless and without voice, who am I?
Do I even matter?
I'm fully with the crowd now.*

Poem by an artist
from Open Theatre.

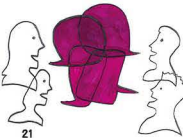
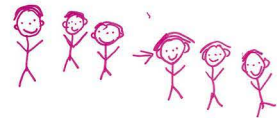
**We call the times when people help:
'speaking with us'.**

**Sometimes when people speak with
you it's good. If they know you well,
they can say the things you want to
say.**

Other people speaking for you

Have you ever felt somebody else was
speaking for you?

How did this make you feel?



*People were
told about my
seizures
before I went
to the farm
for the first
time, by the
boss. This
made me feel
safe.*

Response from
Confidance.



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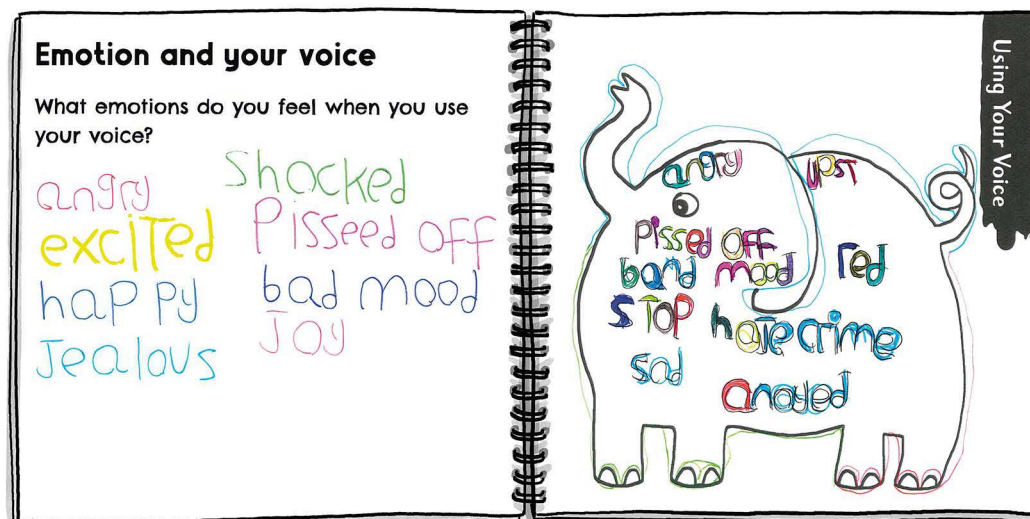
Voice and Emotion

Using our voices brought up a lot of feelings.

Sometimes non-learning disabled people
aren't comfortable with learning disabled
people having strong feelings.

That doesn't mean we don't have them.

Workshop exploring voice
at Under the Stars.



Doodle Book pages exploring
using your voice.

“ A lot of disabled kids don't get their voices heard.
That one particular person interrupts them, and they feel,
oh I can't have a voice. I can't really say much.
And that makes them feel upset and maybe even depressed. ”

Confidance

