

# WELCOME PROJECT CASE STUDY

The 'Welcome Project' was a two-year programme of arts based projects focusing on cohesion and integration which took place at Babington Community Technology College in Leicester.

Babington is located in Beaumont Leys, an outer estate of the city, where until recently the majority of pupils had been drawn from the estate, which was largely white. However, some five years ago the student body became much more diverse within a very short space of time. One reason for this was the unexpected large number of Somali families who moved to Leicester – in the areas where they lived there were not enough school places and so they were placed at Babington, in the early days being brought in by bus. Pressure on secondary school places across the city generally meant that young people from different areas and backgrounds started to attend Babington and at the same time the local area itself was becoming more diverse.

All of these changes caused tensions between students, at times manifested through intimidation, and the school as a whole was struggling to adapt to the new dynamic and demographics.

Soft Touch Arts were approached by a member of the Minority Ethnic Language and Achievement Service (MELAS) to see if we could do some work to address the tensions. With MELAS and college teaching staff we put together a two-year programme of arts activities which was funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund with a match from Government Office East Midlands.

The aim of the Welcome Project was to bring together students from all backgrounds in positive and focused projects which would break down barriers and stereotypes, foster an understanding of each others' cultures and history and lead to new friendships. The project also aimed to provide good practice examples to the college as a whole around the welcoming and integration of new arrivals and the fostering of social cohesion with a view to embedding new and creative approaches within the institution.

It was decided that there would be a focus on multi-media art forms, such as DVDs and animations. This had the advantage that what the projects produced could be viewed by a wide audience, whether in lessons or on the plasma screens put up throughout the college as part of the Welcome Project. As the MELAS staff member said: *"Using multi-media was empowering and the kids felt they had an important voice - the collective nature of the projects added to the empowerment. The media formats worked because they were sending a message and there were large audiences - the products could be seen by 1,000s of people and this boosted pride"*.

During the course of the two years we ran eight projects. One of the early ones, 'Take a Look Around' was carried out within the Geography curriculum with Year 10 students. This project created a DVD with a group of students from different areas of the city about where they lived and their journeys to college in Beaumont Leys.





Cover of magazine produced by Year 10 students which was distributed to all new students for the following three years.

The DVD was then used as a teaching resource by the geography teachers and was shown on the plasma screens.

Even before we had started, the geography teacher noted how the project had raised his awareness: *“I have become more aware of the areas students come from. In the back of my mind I thought most of them came from Beaumont Leys, but in fact not all are from the same background. In my teaching the project will help not to automatically jump to conclusions about the students – I’ll be better informed..”*

One of the Vice Principals admitted that he was a bit unsure about how the programme could help, but was won over and could see the wider benefits; *“Anything that helps the kids to learn is needed. Also work that addresses self esteem and works with different groups. For example, the ‘Take a Look Around’ project – it’s good for students to go outside Beaumont Leys and see other parts of the city.”*

By the end of two years feedback clearly showed that the Welcome Project had been an important element in moving the college towards an environment that was accepting and understanding of diversity both within the student body and between staff and students. For example, the MELAS staff member who had originally approached us had this to say: *“The ethos and attitude has improved in regards to openness to, acceptance of, interest in and relationships with students who have arrived from other places. These are issues about relationships between people and how they treat each other. It feels like the environment is warmer and kids say there is less fighting”.*

Teaching staff both at classroom and management level could also see the difference a long-term arts based programme had made. When asked what he thought at the end of the two years, one teacher told us: *“As a whole the college has changed, eg at the beginning there were serious problems with conflict between kids who were bussed in and local kids from Beaumont Leys. This has improved and I have no doubt that Soft Touch has been part of this. I think this is because for others to see people working together has had a positive impact, especially as some of the kids who did the Welcome Project were in leadership roles. In the process there were friendships formed and this has helped the atmosphere in the school. Diverse groups working together has also had a positive effect and the results will be seen by a wider group of students. The students I have talked to have been really positive about what they have done”.*