



## Music and Arts in Health Promotion and Death Education: The St Christopher's Schools Project

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### ABSTRACT

The reality of death and dying is rarely discussed openly in modern Western societies, while death sometimes is even considered to be a 'failure' in the context of traditional, medically-focused healthcare systems. Similarly, loss and transition are part of the National School Curriculum in the UK, but many schools still find approaching these subjects difficult. In this context St Christopher's hospice in London has initiated and delivered the 'Schools Project' since 2005.

The St Christopher's Schools Project is an innovative community arts programme. It takes the form of short-term collaborative arts projects between terminally ill patients and students from primary and secondary schools, as well as colleges within the hospice's catchment area. The Schools Project has attracted the interest of many other hospices, as well as other healthcare institutions and inspired the development of similar projects, both nationally and internationally.

The aim of the Schools Project is to introduce the hospice and its work to the school communities in a creative and non-threatening way. Within a structured framework students are given the opportunity to interact and engage in music and art making together with terminally ill patients, culminating in an exhibition or performance. Promoting healthier attitudes towards death and dying amongst the students, their teachers, school peers, parents and carers, is at the core of the project.

This paper presents the philosophy and aims, as well as the process and outcomes, of the Schools Project. Additionally, an overview of all of the projects that have taken place at St Christopher's since 2005, as well as some prospects for future development, are given. This will hopefully stimulate a constructive dialogue with regards to the potential role of hospices and the arts in the promotion of health and death education, as well as their potential impact on the development of sustainable healthcare policies and practices not only in palliative care, but also in other health and social care contexts.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades there has been an increased focus on the role of the arts in health promotion and wellness. This focus involves a wide range of art forms, disciplines and practices including the use of music and arts in various therapeutic contexts, communities and healthcare settings.

The arts and music have widely been recognised as health-promoters – a fact that is supported by a growing and diverse body of research and evaluation studies (*e.g.*, Aldridge, 1999; Daykin, Bunt & McClean, 2006; Edwards, 2007; Macnaughton, White & Stacy, 2005; Ruud, 2008; Staricoff, 2004; White, 2009). An emphasis has been given to the development of arts (and arts-based) projects by non-profit groups and organisations, while different government sponsored bodies and national development agencies, such as the Arts Council England (2007), have promoted the use of arts in various health care settings. Furthermore, the development of community-based art work, involving and connecting different groups from local communities has helped to shift attention towards social models of health, as well as issues of participation and social exclusion (Daykin, 2007). However, various questions surrounding people's engagement in music and art processes remain central. For example, *what does art and music mean for the participants? Does the meaning change through participation and in what ways? What constitutes 'engagement' with art and music processes?* Such questions need further exploration to better understand the phenomena around participation in music and art processes, but also to further identify connections between people's participation and attitudes to wellness and illness both on an individual and community level.

This paper attempts to explore some of the above issues in the context of end of life care by presenting the 'St Christopher's Schools Project', innovative community art projects organised by St Christopher's hospice in London, UK that aim to engage hospice patients with local school students. This is mainly a documentary reflective paper which derives from the experiential work of the Arts Team at St Christopher's. Initially, it presents the context, philosophy, aims, as well as some managerial and practical considerations associated with the Schools Project. Then, it provides an insight into people's artistic participation in the projects and explores the complex way in which their engagement unfolds in the projects' practical and social context. In addition, this paper provides an overview and overall outline of the Schools Projects that have taken place at St Christopher's over the last six years (2005-2011), as well as some future prospects. Various issues with regards to the role of hospices and the arts in the promotion of health, quality of life and death education, as well as their potential impact on the development of sustainable healthcare policies and practices, are also discussed.

## HEALTH PROMOTION, DEATH EDUCATION AND THE ARTS: BRINGING HOSPICES AND LOCAL SCHOOLS TOGETHER

Public health education and health promotion have increasingly become vital responsibilities for many areas of healthcare. In end of life care, this is mainly concerned with educating the public about death, dying, loss and transition in life. It relates directly to the promotion of healthy public attitudes towards death and dying and an openness to discuss such issues in society. However, according to the results of a BBC poll (ICM Research, 2005) there has been little change in public attitudes towards death and dying over the last forty years. The reality of death and dying is rarely discussed openly in modern western societies. Although death is at some point inevitable, for most people it is something with which they would rather not engage in everyday living until absolutely necessary. Often it becomes a taboo, a common secret thought and fear.

The consequences of this lack of openness to discuss death and dying have been highlighted by the recent *End of Life Care Strategy* published by the Department of Health, UK in 2008. The strategy points out that the ways in which society views death and dying can contribute to the experiences of people receiving end of life care, as well as to the experiences of their carers. For this reason, the strategy calls for both national and local action to promote public awareness and change attitudes towards death and dying. Hospices have a key role to play in responding to this situation by working with different groups and communities of people in order to integrate the concepts of death and dying into their everyday normal lives in a healthy and non-threatening way. Nigel Hartley, Director of Supportive Care at St Christopher's, reflects on the potential role of hospices in this situation:

Although the hospice movement has been successful in influencing attitudes in medicine and healthcare professions towards death and dying, one of its major failings has been in changing public attitudes. [...] A current and future responsibility, therefore, must be to address this issue and work with communities of people to integrate healthily the concepts of dying and death into their everyday lives. It seems sensible, because of their expertise and experience, that palliative care services should accept this challenge. (Hartley, 2008a, pp. 34-35)

In response to the need for public death education and health promotion, and pre-empting the strategy's call for action, St Christopher's started working with local primary schools with which has collaboratively developed community arts-based projects.

As part of addressing this issue of public education at St Christopher's, one of the things we began to look at was the possibility of working with local primary schools [...] it seemed sensible, if attitudes in society as a whole were to be changed, to start working with children. (Hartley, 2008a, p. 35)

This was also in alignment with the UK National School Curriculum (National Curriculum, 2010) emphasis on teaching students about the impact of bereavement, loss and transition (Personal Health and Social Education at Key Stage 3 and 4), as

well as helping them to develop self-confidence and deal successfully with situations which relate to significant changes and challenges in their lives

As many schools often find approaching these subjects difficult and challenging, local hospices can potentially become useful points of contact for schools looking for help. Most hospices provide helpful resources and may have staff willing to engage with schools in addressing such subjects in a joint health and death education project.

The St Christopher's Schools Project has been in place since 2005 as a way of dispelling myths and promoting healthier responses to death and dying. The arts, as a creative way of engaging people of all ages and enabling them to explore issues associated with the end of life, have a central role in the Schools Project (Hartley, 2008a). Below, various aspects of the Schools Project and the role of the arts in them are outlined. Firstly, however, the context of the hospice and its Arts Team are introduced.

### **SETTING THE CONTEXT: ST CHRISTOPHER'S AND THE ARTS TEAM**

St Christopher's is one of the largest hospices in the UK. It is located in South-East London, and serves a population of one and a half million people across five boroughs (Bromley, Croydon, Southwark, Lewisham, Lambeth). It was founded by Dame Cicely Saunders in 1967.<sup>1</sup> Since then St Christopher's has been widely considered the birthplace of the modern hospice movement as it has embodied a new philosophy that has influenced health care internationally and introduced a new attitude towards death, dying and bereavement (Hartley, 2008b). A holistic approach to living and dying, which includes the physical, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of the person, is practiced daily. Saunders based her vision on three main strands: care, education and research. These are still essential to the hospice's work.

St Christopher's offers palliative care to over two thousand terminally ill individuals every year and the hospice also supports their families and friends. It enables the patients to achieve the best possible quality of life during the final stages of their illness. Death is approached in a way that respects the worth of each individual, and affirms and dignifies life. Care takes place in three contexts: Inpatient, Home-Care within the community and The Anniversary Centre (Day Care and Outpatients). The Anniversary Centre is considered to be the 'heart' of the hospice. It functions as a social meeting place for Day Care and outpatients, inpatients, families, friends and other visitors to the hospice – creating a sense of community and belonging.

Education and research are the other two main strands of the hospice's work. St Christopher's is one of the largest providers of palliative care education and research internationally. Its Education Centre is based in the hospice grounds and runs various training courses and events both within the centre and increasingly to health and social care professionals within community venues. The latter is an important

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<sup>1</sup> Dame Cicely Saunders (1918-2005) was a trained nurse, medical social worker and physician. She is recognised as the founder of the modern hospice movement as she revolutionised the way in which society cares for the ill, the dying and the bereaved (Du Boulay, 2007).

aspect of its educational provision which informs, supports and educates generalist health and social care workers in the local community.

### THE ARTS TEAM

St Christopher's has a large Arts Team which consists of seven members: three community artists, one art therapist and three music therapists (all therapists are registered with the Health Professions Council).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, a number of music and art therapy postgraduate students from a range of higher educational institutions join the team each year as part of placement opportunities. Members of the Arts Team come from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, including: commercial music, opera, theatre composition, graphic design, special education, fine art, integrative arts psychotherapy, community arts and counselling. The diverse and collaborative work of the Arts Team members enables a wide range of arts activities and projects to take place in the hospice. These include various art-forms (*e.g.*, visual arts, music, drama, poetry/creative writing and digital arts) which are offered in a range of formats and places to suit individual patient needs (*e.g.*, one-to-one therapeutic sessions at the bedside or at home, open community groups and family group work).

The Arts Team plays a central role in the provision of supportive and psychosocial care offered by St Christopher's and is highlighted as a part of the hospice's future strategic development (Hartley, 2008a). The arts provide patients, families and friends with opportunities for self-actualisation and self-realisation, for motivation and growth, as well as for coping with change. They also offer possibilities to make sense of situations, to create something with personal meaning, to develop social relationships and to leave something behind (Hartley & Payne, 2008). The arts can enable meaningful conversations that may not otherwise take place, and can contain people's feelings with dignity and respect. They can offer a way of making sense of the world and help to perform our identities – to explore and express who we are, who we have been, and who we might become (Aldridge, 1996; Tsiris, 2008a).

Using the arts in a range of forms and formats, the Arts Team is a key component in linking the hospice with the local community. As well as the day-to-day work with patients, their families and friends, Arts Team members also organise various community events with the aim of creating links between the local community and the hospice. They organise open live concerts on site, facilitate different forums for art practitioners and participate in the production of films and recordings that give the public an insight into the hospice's work and promote healthier attitudes towards death and dying (Tsiris, Dives & Prince, 2010).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing this paper, changes with regards to the professional qualifications of some Arts Team members took place. Among these changes, a community artist was undertaking training in counselling, while another community artist qualified as an art psychotherapist. The latter was a co-facilitator (while still working as a community artist at the hospice) in the case example that follows in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> *'Into that good night'* is an example of a documentary that took place at St Christopher's in December 2009 by Channel 4. This documentary follows a group of day care patients and illustrates their experiences of living and dying as these unfold through their participation in an eight-week art project.

## THE ST CHRISTOPHER'S SCHOOLS PROJECT

Based on the belief that “in order to begin to unravel the complexities of death education and community involvement, vital and pressing questions for hospices and end of life care services must be based around how communities can become engaged in such matters” (Hartley, 2011), St Christopher’s initiated the Schools Project.

The St Christopher’s Schools Project, as a community-based arts initiative, brings local school students together with both outpatients and in-patients. This initiative provides opportunities to explore openly issues related to death, loss, bereavement and transition in life. In this way, the Schools Project raises awareness with regards to such issues within the broader local community, by bringing together in an innovative way two different organisations (hospice and school) that serve this community (see Figure 1).

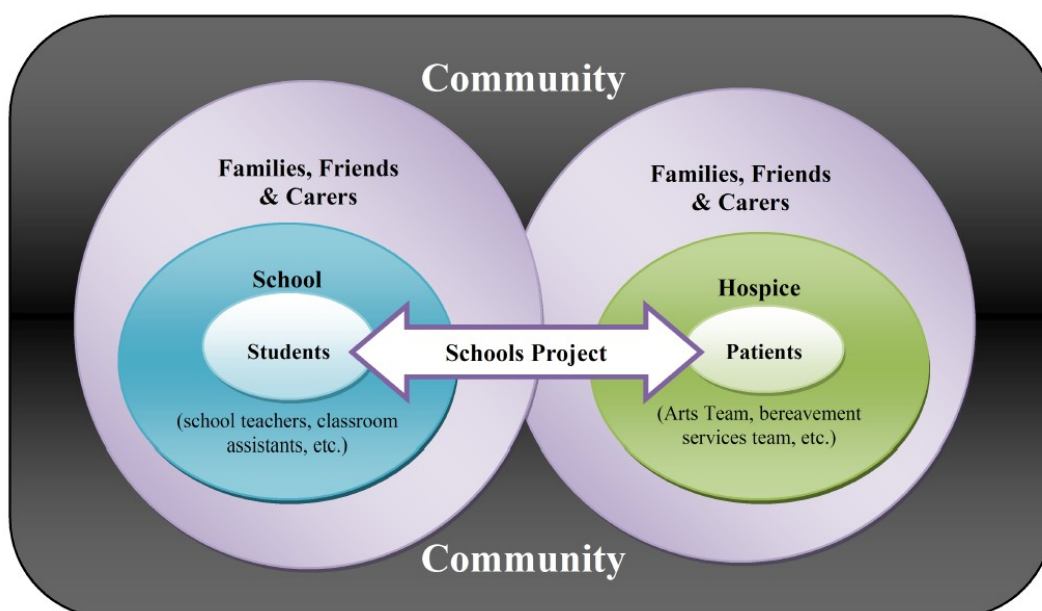


Figure 1: The St Christopher’s Schools Project: A community-based arts initiative

The Schools Project adopts an ecological and community-based model of work (White, 2009). On this basis, creative, educational, reflective and therapeutic components of death education and health promotion are integrated constructively within a coherent framework. Practical, as well as ethical, aspects of this framework are constantly monitored and managed by a wide multidisciplinary team including therapists, counselors and teachers (see below for further details).

### THE ROLE OF THE ARTS

In the early stages of developing the Schools Project, the role of music and art was considered to be a vital part of the project. Artistic engagement would be a meaningful way of developing relationships between students and hospice patients, and enable meaning to be explored in metaphorical, symbolic, verbal and non-verbal ways. Music and arts were considered appropriate as (i) they focus on the process, but also provide a clear product that could be performed and/or displayed (*e.g.*, song or recording, or piece of art), (ii) they provide non-threatening ways to explore meaning

in death and dying, and (iii) they can 'hold' and give access to the paradoxes of living and dying that often cannot be articulated. Furthermore, the innate creativity, intrinsic to every human being irrespective of age, culture or life stage, holds the power to connect people. For hospice patients and students this can help them to explore and discover meaning in living and dying. Sands (2008) and Tasker (2010), community artists of the Arts Team, mention that an integral aspect of people's engagement with the arts in the Schools Project is its capacity to enable various levels of reflection and acknowledgment of the crucial transitions that both patients in the final stages of their lives and students are going through.

### **THE BEGINNINGS OF THE IDEA AND A SHARED VISION**

The Schools Project started in 2005 with a pilot project which was undertaken with St John Baptist School, a one form entry Church of England Primary School in the London Borough of Bromley. Children aged 8-9 years old (Year 5) were considered to be the most suitable age group to work with, especially as loss and transition are part of their school curriculum. Initially, school staff who would be involved with the project visited the hospice in order to gain a sense of the organisation and its work ethos. At this stage an overall plan for the project was developed and in the 2005 summer term, the pilot project began. From the outset of the project, a strong relationship between the school and the hospice was gradually established which has flourished over the last six years (2005-2011). Today, the Schools Project has become an official part of their school curriculum and every June, Year 5 students from St John Baptist School take part in a Schools Project with St Christopher's patients.

### **MANAGERIAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The pilot project with St John Baptist School was the first of its kind, and it was new territory for everyone involved. At this formative stage it was crucial to identify all the stakeholders from both organisations (hospice and school) and their respective responsibilities in the project. Additionally, during the planning phase of the pilot project, some initial stimulating questions around managerial, safety and ethical requirements were raised.

Being aware of the complexities that such a project would involve, it was important to identify and establish collaboration with other departments and professionals within the hospice who could provide useful expertise (*e.g.*, nursing team, bereavement services, senior management team). A vital group to establish strong relationships with was the hospice's children's bereavement service (the Candle Team). Collaboration with them was important not only during the establishment of the project, but also throughout its duration (Hartley, 2008a, 2011). Their support was particularly helpful in terms of managing the complexities of working with children who have potentially had personal experiences of bereavement and loss. Also, their collaboration with Arts Team members was significant in managing holistically the potential situation where a patient participant dies during a project.

At the formative stage of the Schools Project consenting procedures were established. These procedures included ensuring parents' permission for their children's

participation, as well as additional consent for the potential use of relevant material in the public domain (*e.g.*, publications and use of audio/visual material for education, fundraising or other purposes). In addition, appropriate safe-guarding and complaint procedures and protocols were put in place according to both hospice and school policies.

As for the recruitment procedures, all patients attending the Anniversary Centre at the hospice were invited to participate in the project. Similarly, all children of the particular school class involved in the project were invited to participate. Both patients' and children's participation was voluntary and each of them could withdraw at any time.

Both hospice and school staff's contribution is essential for the accomplishment of the Schools Project. Art and Candle Team members, teachers and classroom assistants are all providing their own skills and expertise in order to facilitate the exploration of meaning associated with death and dying through the development of relationships between students and patients, and their experiential participation in art making. Similarly, the school and the hospice, as organisations, function as catalysts that enable and facilitate the connection between patients and students, but also with their families, friends and the wider community. Their organisational role involves a wide range of managerial aspects.

Hartley (2008a), who refers extensively to various managerial issues of the Schools Project, points out some key aspects that need to be taken into consideration when developing such projects:

- Understanding the organisational strategy and needs of participants in both organisations;
- Working with the senior management team to ensure support in case any difficulties arise, particularly in relation to public perception;
- Supporting and working with the members of the Arts Team, as well as with other palliative care service departments;
- Finding an appropriate partner (*i.e.*, a school) with an understanding of the Schools Project vision;
- Clearly defining the project's aims, objectives and programme in order to ensure commitment from all stakeholders and avoid potential misunderstandings;
- Clear costing and funding.

The early exploration between hospice and school of all of the above managerial, as well as safety and ethical issues is vital for the successful development of the project.



## STRUCTURE OF THE SCHOOLS PROJECT

Each Schools Project normally has a theme. This aims to provide a common framework and point of reference for all participants' art work. The theme of each project is carefully thought out by the Arts Team and the school in order to provide a focus for the collaboration between patients and students. The theme relates to life and death, and fits within the curriculum of the school wherever possible. However, it needs to be general (not prescriptive) in order to provide a flexible framework for the art processes within which potential symbolic meanings and metaphors can be generated, as well as for personal stories and experiences of living and dying to emerge and be shared. *Sea of Extraordinary Stories* is an example of a Schools Project theme, where patients shared life stories and experiences with teenage students from a local city arts academy. In the finished piece of artwork, students reflected back the patients' stories through a performance of improvised theatre including music and singing in which the patients also participated.

Each project takes place over four weeks (one day each week) and includes three main phases: Introduction (Week 1), Collaborative art work (Weeks 2 and 3), and Celebration (Week 4)<sup>4</sup>. The processes involved in each phase are elaborated through the following case example.

### CASE EXAMPLE : RIVERS

In June 2010 St Christopher's embarked on a new Schools Project together with St John Baptist Primary School. Being the first school to participate in the St Christopher's Schools Project in 2005, St John Baptist School had five years experience of the procedures involved and therefore most introductory and managerial aspects were already in place.

Prior to the commencement of the project, a member of the Arts Team liaised with the school to organise the project's timetable. A music therapist and a community artist from the Arts Team,<sup>5</sup> in collaboration with a children's bereavement worker from the hospice, were assigned to facilitate this project. They met with the class teacher and deputy head master in order to develop a project theme and to finalise the logistics of the project (including transport and consenting procedures). All art materials were provided by St Christopher's, although in subsequent projects these have sometimes been provided by the school.

### PROJECT THEME AND ART FORMS

The theme of the project was *Rivers* and was chosen on the basis of various criteria, both explicit and implicit. This theme fitted with the school's educational curriculum, but also with the Schools Project's agenda for death education and health promotion, as the concept and image of rivers could afford certain metaphoric

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<sup>4</sup> Schools Projects with secondary and higher education institutions usually take place over eight weeks in order to provide more time for interaction and art work between patients and students. However, the phases of the project remain the same: Introduction (Week 1), Collaborative art work (Weeks 2 to 7), and Celebration (Week 8).

<sup>5</sup> For simplicity, when both members of the Arts Team are referred to together in this case example, they are named as 'artists'.

associations with regards to transition, change and death in life. More specifically, the theme of rivers could support a process of meaning making in relation to nature, flow, time, change, journey, the cycle of life including death and dying.

The art forms for this project were music and visual arts. More specifically, the project involved music improvisation and song-writing, as well as felt making.<sup>6</sup> These art forms were chosen by taking into consideration three main aspects:

- *The professional background and expertise of each of the artists who were assigned to facilitate this project;*
- *The practical aspects of the project:* these art forms could function well as a link between the work in each session and the group (as explained later), and they could be accessible to participants with potential mobility difficulties. Additionally, these art forms could leave a legacy of the project through the creation of an art product that could be shared with other people and exhibited in each organisation (hospice and school);
- *The possibilities that each art form affords:* song-writing could enable the exploration of identities and meanings, as well as the articulation of feelings and experiences through lyrics (Baker & Wigram, 2005). Felt making could provide a metaphor of social fabric, supporting a process of integration between the age, cultural, social and health diversity of the participants. Each art form could be complementary to the other by enabling different levels of awareness to emerge and be shared through collaborative creative experiences.

## **PARTICIPANTS AND OVERVIEW OF SESSIONS**

A group of thirty children aged eight and nine years old (Year 5), and a group of fifteen patients, participated in the project. The children's group was split into two subgroups of fifteen children each in order to allow more time and space for interaction and artistic engagement between them and the patients. Both artists worked with each subgroup. Taking into consideration various practical aspects (*e.g.*, material and space needed for each session / subgroup), the music sessions took place at the school, and the art sessions at the hospice (for overview of sessions, see Table 1). However, it was important to ensure that the sessions taking place at the school remained focused on exploring issues related to living, dying and death. Song-writing seemed to be a dynamic way of maintaining the children's focus on the project and connect patients and children, even when working in different places (school / hospice).

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<sup>6</sup> Felt is a non-woven cloth that is produced by rubbing spun and dyed wool fibres with warm soapy water (for more information, see Smith, 2006). In this project, traditional methods and natural products were used, such as merino wool and olive oil soap. Felt making is a medium for expression in textile art and is a natural material.

	Hospice	School
Week 1	<p><b>Introductory morning session with patients only</b> (Music therapist)</p> <p><b>Introductory afternoon session with patients and children</b> (Music therapist, bereavement worker, teacher and two classroom assistants)</p>	<p><b>Introductory morning session with all the children</b> (Community artist, bereavement worker, teacher and two classroom assistants)</p>
Week 2	<p><b>Morning art session with patients and children’s Group A</b> (Community artist, teacher and a classroom assistant)</p>	<p><b>Morning music session with children’s Group B</b> (Music therapist and two classroom assistants)</p>
Week 3	<p><b>Morning art session with patients and children’s Group B</b> (Community artist, teacher and a classroom assistant)</p>	<p><b>Morning music session with children’s Group A</b> (Music therapist and two classroom assistants)</p>
Week 4	<p><b>Afternoon celebration session with patients, children, hospice and school staff, families and friends</b> (Community artist, music therapist, bereavement worker, teacher and classroom assistants)</p>	

Table 1: Overview of the St John Baptist Primary School project sessions (June-July 2010)

**WEEK ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The first week involved a morning and an afternoon introductory session which took place at the school and hospice respectively. During the morning session, the music therapist worked with the patients’ group at the hospice. They were introduced to the project and its theme, and discussed plans for following weeks. The session focused on generating some initial ideas and meanings that patients were possibly relating to rivers as metaphors for life. Some patients also reflected on their personal experiences of rivers and connected their memories with different words and sounds. The music therapist wrote down everyone’s ideas, words, phrases, memories or sounds on a piece of paper which was used in subsequent sessions with the children in order to compose relevant song lyrics as seen in Box 1.

*...peace...the flow of rivers ...the cycle of life...  
 ...river of peace...love...children...  
 ...playing...fishing...rivers and the sea...*

Box 1: Some examples of words and phrases generated by the patients

During the same morning, the community artist together with the bereavement worker visited the school to meet the children and staff. The children, who had already had a brief introductory discussion with their teacher about the nature and aim of the Schools Project and the hospice’s work, were given the opportunity to discuss and reflect on their preparatory work together with the hospice staff. They

also showed a DVD produced by St Christopher's illustrating its work and the Schools Project.<sup>7</sup> Allowing space and time for the children to raise any questions and share any personal experiences of death, dying, illness, disability, loss and grief within their families was vital at this stage. An open discussion about the feelings that are associated with losing someone that you love followed and the children had the opportunity to express any anxieties they may have had about their visit to the hospice and involvement in the project. Lastly, the community artist, together with the bereavement worker, helped the children form questions that they would like to ask patients during the afternoon session the same day.

In the afternoon, children, together with their teacher and classroom assistants visited the hospice and met the group of patients. Children asked the patients various questions such as: *Why are you at the hospice? How did you feel when you first came? What were you doing before you came to the hospice? Were you anxious when you first came? How long have you been here? What is a normal day for you at the hospice? Is everyone at the hospice going to die? What kind of diseases do people at the hospice have?*

The children's honesty and the patients' readiness to reply to their questions were surprising and profound. Patients shared memories and experiences from their lives, as well as some facts and their personal attitudes with regards to their illness. Patients, children and artists also discussed ideas and plans about the project in which everyone would be involved during the following weeks. At the end of their visit, the children took a tour around the hospice's premises in order to become familiar with the place and its way of working.

### **WEEKS TWO AND THREE: COLLABORATIVE ART WORK**

During these weeks the children were split into two subgroups (Group A and B) and each of them participated in a two-hour long session each week. In week two Group A visited the hospice. Children and patients engaged and collaborated actively in an art process, which involved felt making. They were reminded of the theme of the project (Rivers), and were shown and helped with the creation of four large felt paintings. Patients and children were divided into four sub-groups, each group working on one felt. Each group needed to collaborate in order to come up with a design concept and to work together on this. The groups chose to orient the felts as landscape or portrait formats, so two hang vertically whilst the other two hang horizontally. Each group chose different perspectives; to create an underwater scene, to split their felt into two parts, one part above water and one part underwater; to give a bird's eye perspective; to give the perspective as if standing on a bridge (see Images 1 and 2). The groups worked together on choosing colour and form. The session focused on enabling patients and children to engage and relate freely with each other through creative, collaborative art making. Through this process, opportunities to explore questions and meanings related to illness, death, living and dying emerged. For example, a child shared her experience of her grandmother's death who had died at St Christopher's a few years before. The child talked about her

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<sup>7</sup> This video material is available [here](#). Originally, this material derives from the School Projects Information Pack published by St Christopher's Hospice (2008). If you would like to receive a print copy of the pack, please contact: [d.brady@stchristophers.org.uk](mailto:d.brady@stchristophers.org.uk).

grieving experience and acknowledged the connection of the hospice with her personal biography and memories. In this and other similar examples, the artists helped the participants to explore such issues both through art and verbal interaction, either individually or collectively as deemed appropriate. In all instances, any potential distress was managed constructively by the artists.



Image 1: Detail of an underwater perspective



Image 2: Detail of a bird's eye perspective

Group B worked with the music therapist at the school. Children were introduced to patients' memories, words and phrases regarding rivers (drawing from patients' first session material). The group started reflecting on some of this material through instrumental music improvisation. They created different kinds of river and nature soundscapes. For example, they reflected musically the flow of small and calm rivers, as well as of big, strong and wavy rivers. The children were also encouraged to share their own personal experiences and ideas of rivers as metaphors for life. Gradually the group started to give shape and extend patients' initial words and phrases and build up song lyrics. Patients had suggested writing the lyrics in the form of the song *Blue Moon*.<sup>8</sup> This song, which was unknown to most children and became a new learning experience in itself, provided a structure upon which they could develop and frame their lyrics.

Within this framework, the children with the support of the music therapist and classroom assistants spontaneously shared different words and phrases. Their words and phrases were written on a flip chart and then the music therapist facilitated the group to explore different ways of fitting them into the song's format. This involved a creative process where the meaning of the lyrics was negotiated and various musical ideas were shared, a process through which patients' and children's individual subjective experiences of loss and transition started taking the form of a collective representation through the structure and content of a song. Children's insights and capacity to reflect symbolically and metaphorically on such concepts was remarkable. They reflected on the meaning of flow, joy and love, as well as its relevance to the 'river' of life. Children also explored the ideas of togetherness and companionship, as well as those of chaos and peace, by bringing examples from their own life histories, but also from the world around them. Such ideas were also reflected through music making.

In week three, the children's subgroups swapped over and continued the work created in the sessions from the previous week (see Table 1). Children completed their felt making as well as their song, which they entitled *River of Peace* (see full lyrics in Box 2).

<p><b>RIVER OF PEACE</b></p> <p>River of peace The song is flowing along I saw you coming and go And all your life before you</p> <p>River of joy My soul will be at peace You're beautiful to see To see the water flow on</p>	<p>And then my worries were washed away It seems that you have heard me pray I hope you'll always understand me And you'll be by me every day</p> <p>River of life Your heart brings so much joy I'll never leave you alone You love me more than anyone</p> <p>River of love You spread your love to the world You take the chaos away My life will be at peace</p>
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Box 2: Lyrics of the song 'River of Peace'

<sup>8</sup> A song originally composed by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart in 1934.

#### **WEEK FOUR: CELEBRATION**

This was the final session and was dedicated to a celebration of the project. All stakeholders (including school and hospice staff, as well as families and friends) met at St Christopher's to celebrate the culmination of the project and the relationships that had been developed between all participants over the course of the project. Children and patients presented their artwork and reflected on their experience of being involved in the project and the different art processes. They showed the felts that had been created and described the experience of making them in practical terms. They also described the sensational experience of working with felt and soapy water, and the experience of working alongside patients; how this helped to form connections and facilitate communication. The children also performed the song *River of Peace* for which they had composed the lyrics and patients had the opportunity to see how the children gave shape to their initial ideas, words, phrases and memories. Both patients and children shared the meaning of their art work using rivers as a metaphor for change and transition in life. They talked about the experiences that both patients and children had gained during the project. Children reflected on their initial reactions and anxiety when coming to the hospice for the first time and how this had changed over the weeks. Also, children and patients reflected on the process of working on something that has been started by others (in previous sessions), as this was the case with the process of making the song and the felts. This was likened to the process of life (*i.e.*, how the younger generation inherits from the older generation), and it facilitated a process of connection between patients and children, hospice and school, art and music, and life and death. In this way, the celebration became a way of communicating the essence and meaning of the project with their families and friends, as well as with the wider community thus further promoting healthier attitudes towards death and dying.

After the completion of the project, the felts together with the song lyrics were exhibited at the hospice and at the school. In this way, the work has been communicated beyond the group which was involved in the project with the hope to raise public awareness and enable other people to reflect creatively on issues related to death, dying, transition and loss.

### **OVERVIEW OF THE SCHOOL PROJECTS AND KEY THEMES**

#### **OVERVIEW**

Following the pilot project in 2005, St Christopher's has since completed thirty-three projects. Eighteen projects have taken place with primary schools (since 2006) and twelve projects with secondary and higher education institutions (since 2008) across the five boroughs the hospice serves. In January 2010 St Christopher's also expanded the Schools Project into care homes. Since then, three care-home projects have already taken place together with local primary schools.

The first projects that took place during the formative stage of the Schools Project were funded by the Arts Council England, the Daisy Foundation, and the Alfred and Peggy Harvey Trust. The current expansion of the project into care

homes is supported and funded by the Arts Council England together with the Alfred and Peggy Harvey Trust.

The following tables provide an overview of all of the projects which have taken place after the completion of the pilot project (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). The tables provide some details with regards to the Arts Team members involved, as well as the themes and art-forms employed in each project. As in the above case study, in each case the theme of the projects were chosen in collaboration between Arts Team members and school staff. Where possible and appropriate, the patients and the students were involved in the process of choosing a theme too. Similarly, where possible and appropriate, the theme would be connected to a relevant subject of the school curriculum. Each theme was developed in a way that allowed life stories and biographies to be shared, and issues regarding death, dying and transition in life to be explored between students and patients.

<b>Projects with Primary Schools at St Christopher's</b>				
<b>Date</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Arts Team members</b>	<b>Art media / forms</b>	<b>Project themes</b>
Jun 2006	St John Baptist Primary School	Two community artists	Mosaic and digital collage	Trees
Apr 2007	Woodmansterne Primary School	Two community artists	Silk painting and mixed media	Community
May 2007	Hitherfields Primary School	Two community artists	Music, poetry, storytelling and creative writing	Identities
Jun 2007	St John Baptist Primary School	Two community artists	Silk painting	Value words
Nov 2007	John Steiner Primary School	Two community artists	Willow and tissue paper sculpting	Lanterns and parade
Nov 2007	Sydenham High Junior School	Community artist	Willow and tissue paper sculpting	Lanterns and parade
Apr 2008	Woodmansterne Primary School	Two community artists	Collage and mixed visual arts	Community
May 2008	Hitherfields Primary School	Two community artists	Willow and tissue paper sculpting	Lanterns and parade
Jun 2008	Bessemer Grange Primary School	Two community artists	Mosaic	The four elements
Jun 2008	St John Baptist Primary School	Two community artists	Mask making	African masks
May 2009	Bessemer Grange Primary School	Two community artists	Pottery and collage	Faces



Jun 2009	St John Baptist Primary School	Community artist	Collage	Dragon
Oct 2009	Holy Cross Primary School	Two community artists	Mosaic	Identities of organisations (school and hospice)
Jan - Feb 2010	Bessemer Grange Primary School (together with Trinity College of Music)	Music therapist and community artist	Music and visual arts	Elephants
May 2010	St Christopher's Primary School	Two community artists and a music therapist	Music, pottery, poetry and mixed media	Side by side
Jun - Jul 2010	St John Baptist Primary School	Music therapist and community artist	Music and felt making	Rivers
Oct 2010	Holy Cross Primary School	Community artist	Mosaic	The symbol of the cross
Oct 2010	Holy Innocent Primary School <sup>9</sup>	Community artist	Collage	Identity and who am I?

Table 2: Projects with Primary Schools at St Christopher's (2005-2011)

Projects with Secondary and Higher Education Institutions at St Christopher's				
Date	School	Arts Team members	Art media	Project themes
Mar - Apr 2008	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Music therapist	Music (song writing)	Soundtracks
Jun - Jul 2008	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Two community artists	Drama and visual arts	You are my sunshine
Mar 2009	Trinity College of Music	Music therapist and community artist	Puppetry and music (song writing)	London of yester year
Jun 2009	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Community artist	Visual and digital arts	Puppets
Jun - Jul 2009	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Community artist	Drama and visual arts	Catch a falling star
Nov - Dec 2009	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Music therapist	Music	Song writing
Jan - Feb 2010	Forest Hill Boys School	Music therapist	Music	Come fly with me

<sup>9</sup> This project took place at Harris Hospice, a sister hospice of St Christopher's which is located in Orpington, South-East London.

Jan - Feb 2010	Trinity College of Music (together with Bessemer Grange Primary School)	Music therapist and community artist	Music and visual arts	Elephants
Jun 2010	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Community artist and art therapist	Visual and digital arts (multi-media)	Things I would like to be remembered of
Jun - Jul 2010	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Music therapist	Drama and music	Sea of extraordinary stories
Sep - Dec 2010	Mossbourne Academy <sup>10</sup>	Music therapist and community artist	Visual arts, music and mixed media	Identity
Nov - Dec 2010	The BRIT School for Performing Arts & Technology	Music therapist	Music	Song writing

Table 3: Projects with Secondary and Higher Education Institutions at St Christopher's (2008-2011)

Projects with Primary Schools at Care Homes					
Date	Care Home	School	Arts Team members	Art media	Project theme
Jan - Feb 2010	Windmill Lodge Care Home	Richard Atkins Primary School	Community artist	Visual arts	Sharing memories
June - July 2010	Kirkdale Care Home	Sydenham High Junior School	Community artist and music therapist	Music and visual arts	Flowers
Sep 2010	Hamilton Lodge Care Home	Fairlawn Primary School	Community artist and music therapist	Music and visual arts	Improvised musical instruments

Table 4: Projects with Primary Schools at Care Homes (2010-2011)

## KEY THEMES

As part of an informal evaluation, St Christopher's has collected over the past years information with regards to people's engagement in the Schools Project.<sup>11</sup> In particular, feedback forms were completed by participants of different projects and a

<sup>10</sup> This project took place in collaboration with St Joseph's hospice in East London.

<sup>11</sup> All ethical aspects connected to this evaluation were scrutinised throughout by the senior management team of St Christopher's and multidisciplinary team members. Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were maintained throughout the evaluation procedure. All participants were informed about their quotes possibly being used for publication purposes and they provided relevant consent. Some participants gave their permission to reveal their identity or personal information.

record of anecdotal information (*e.g.*, informal oral feedback) from hospice and school staff, patients, students, as well as their families and friends, was kept.

The outcomes of this evaluation have shown how people's involvement in the Schools Project changes their attitudes towards death and dying. According to Hartley (2011), a content analysis of the collected information has revealed four key themes:

- Theme A: Changing attitudes towards living and dying
- Theme B: Normalising death and dying
- Theme C: Patients as educators
- Theme D: Creating and sustaining healthy relationships

Each theme is further developed below and illustrated with various excerpts taken from the letters and comments of students, patients, families and staff who participated in different projects.

#### **THEME A: CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS LIVING AND DYING**

The Schools Project has been a useful way of dispelling myths and promoting healthier responses to death, living and dying. This can often alter previous negative experiences of death and dying. A ten year old child said at the end of a project:

my grandmother died at the hospice and I wasn't allowed to go [...] I enjoyed seeing that it was ok really [...]

Another example comes from an excerpt of a letter that the school teacher of St John Baptist Primary School sent to St Christopher's, after the completion of the pilot school project:

The project was such a success it has now become an annual recurrence for St. John's Year 5 children. This is a real testament to the success of the project and the unique relationship between the school and the hospice, from which we have continued to learn so much. We know that the lives of these children, and indeed ourselves has been changed by the experiences we all shared, and that we all now have a much more balanced and healthy view of death, dying, loss and bereavement.

#### **THEME B: NORMALISING DEATH AND DYING**

Changing attitudes towards living and dying usually relates to a process of 'normalising' death and dying. In other words, it relates to a process of perceiving and understanding death as a normal part of life's cycle. As two nine-year-old children said:

[...] at the start I felt a bit scared and shaky 'cos I thought it would smell and be full of sick people, but they were just normal [...]

[...] I felt happy doing the art, it took my mind off death and put my mind on understanding that we all have to die someday [...]

A similar ‘normalising’ experience has been expressed by some patients too, who commented particularly on the importance of intergenerational collaborative work:

[...] I loved the kids coming here – it makes it all feel so normal and OK [...]

[...] I came alive again when the teenagers were here – they’ve got all their life ahead of them.

### **THEME C: PATIENTS AS EDUCATORS**

Having something to give and something to teach others about one’s life and experiences has been identified as a significant aspect of the Schools Project work. Patients and students have the opportunity to perform their identities by sharing life experiences, stories and biographies through collaborative music and art making (Aldridge, 1996, 2004; Pavlicevic & Ansdell, 2009; Tsiris, 2008a). Sharing their wisdom of life experiences often becomes a useful learning experience in terms of coping with other bereavement and terminal illness in their life. A patient said:

[...] I’m glad you take this seriously, I feel I’ve got something that the children can learn from [...]

Throughout the Schools Project, both patients and students have also gained experience with regards to how to cope with similar issues in their personal lives and with their own families. A patient once said:

[...] watching the staff and others talk to the children, it showed me a way to talk to my own grand children [...]

### **THEME D: CREATING AND SUSTAINING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

Another key theme of the Schools Project is the creation of sustainable healthy relationships. This refers to a multi-level of relationships, between patients and students, between hospice and school staff, and between hospice, school and community.

Many parents have mentioned that they had never visited the hospice before, despite knowing of its existence, as they were afraid of what they would see. However, the Schools Project and their children's enthusiasm enabled them to cross the threshold and change their attitude. As a parent once said:

[...] I’ve lived in this area all of my life and have been too afraid to come into the building (*the hospice*) [...] is it possible to volunteer some of my time to continue to help?

Similarly, in a letter that the head-teacher of a school wrote to the hospice, he comments on the role of the Schools Project with regards to the development of healthy relationships in the community:

Thank you so much for the thoughtful and creative journey you led the children, staff and parents on this term. We learned much about ourselves, each other and our community. The children's lives have been truly changed, and we are confident that when they have to face the death of someone close, this experience will have equipped them with skills and attitudes to deal with it well and effectively. By the way, we have all signed up to the hospice fundraising walk, and hope that our input will make a difference. The wonderful works of art which are now on display at the school look fantastic – next year's Year 5 are already asking about coming along next year [...]

This shows that the Schools Project motivated the school community to engage in other ways with the hospice (*e.g.*, fundraising walk) and sustain a relationship with its community. Many teachers have also commented that many of the students refer to their encounter with St Christopher's as their most abiding school memory.

The above themes and outcomes have been helpful in identifying important aspects of the Schools Project's potential. However, some other aspects can be explored in greater depth, including issues related to 'aesthetic politics' which are prominent in the Schools Project (*i.e.*, how the participants' artistic engagement in the projects activates new aesthetic perceptions of what art is and what its meaning/value is for them). For this reason, St Christopher's is planning to conduct a formal evaluation of the project. This evaluation will hopefully explore how participants' potential aesthetic transformation (Tsirir, 2008b) is reciprocally connected to new ways of thinking, valuing and experiencing death, dying and transition in life. This evaluation will also hopefully provide further details with regards to the School Project's strengths, weaknesses, limitations and pathways for further development.

## CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Over the last six years the St Christopher's Schools Project has been recognised as a creative and effective way to promote health and wellbeing within the context of end of life care and education. The Schools Project has shown in particular how seemingly 'different' groups of people can be drawn to work together on a common art project in ways that allow them not only to get to know each other, but also to create new culture(s) – a process that can potentially provide resources for new forms of awareness to develop with regards to death, dying, loss and transition in life, as well as to the role of arts in life.

In this way, the Schools Project is a practical manifestation of Paul Willis' concept of grounded aesthetics, which is "the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meanings" (Willis, 1990, p. 211). From this perspective, the Schools Project enables students and patients to create their own meaning, ideas and symbols which resonate to their personal biographies and shared experiences of loss and transition. Therefore, as Willis (1990) describes, grounded aesthetics become the yeast of a common culture. In this context, they become the yeast of a new common culture of both living and dying.

This emergence of new culture(s) which promote healthier attitudes towards hospices, death and dying holds great potential for other health and social care environments within society. Currently St Christopher's has expanded the Schools Project initiative by transferring the project into care homes. It is hoped that these projects will develop over the next three years into a new death education programme, linking other community groups such as local faith groups, healthy living centres, local hospitals, pubs, as well as a range of other groups. For example, one project involves a local care home working alongside a community motorbike group.

In the UK, the St Christopher's Schools Project has already started to influence the development of sustainable policies and practices (Hartley, 2007) in the field of end of life care. More particularly, it has been recommended as a practice for all hospices in the UK (DH, 2008). As a result of this many hospices have already started organising projects with their local schools (for example, see Hadley, 2010). Also, in 2009 the National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC) set up the Dying Matters Coalition as a broad and inclusive national coalition which aims to change public knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards death, dying and bereavement. As part of this, Dying Matters (2010) recently set up a 'National Schools Group' dedicated to the development of schools work within end of life care with the aim to bring a fundamental change in society towards dying, death and bereavement.

The Schools Project has quickly gained momentum with similar projects starting in hospices (as well as other healthcare organisations) not only in the UK, but also internationally. More specifically, the Schools Project has been duplicated in hospices in the U.S., Australia and across Europe. Of course, each hospice has adapted the project to fit the nature and needs of its particular local community. An outstanding example where the St Christopher's Schools Project was adopted and developed by another country is the Groundswell Project (2011), an Australian group of people focusing on using the arts for the promotion of resilience and well-being through different phases of life, as well as on increasing community participation in end of life issues. The Groundswell Project developed a Schools Drama Project involving two organisations: The Motor Neurone Disease Association of NSW and Penrith High School in Sydney. Their project won a National Award for excellence in Arts and Health in Palliative Care (Groundswell Project, 2011).

There is much potential and possibility to work with communities in order to promote healthier attitudes towards death, dying and transition in life. The Schools Project has demonstrated how diverse community groups can come together and work side by side towards a shared vision. It has also shown that different groups within society have much to learn from each other, and sharing in a creative process can enrich the lives of individuals at the time and into the future. Additionally, the Schools Project reflects how music and art can transform communities by enabling people who live within them to give form and expression to their own worlds, wisdom and biographies. In this sense, the Schools Project can be described as aesthetically 'activist', as it activates new ways of experiencing and valuing the creation of art. This shift in what people value in music and art making,

simultaneously activates a shift in what people value both as part of their lives and within the wider world. Changing attitudes towards the arts are closely interrelated to changing attitudes towards living and dying. The Schools Project reminds us that the canvas is the community itself and we are all the artists; we have a shared responsibility for its shape, value and direction both now and in the future.

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