

Imagination without distraction – Karen Russell-Graham

now>press>play delivers immersive listening experiences designed to transport children into a different world.

Experiences are suitable for key stages 1-3, and subject areas include history, science, literacy, maths, RE and PSHE. Whilst listening as a group, children become the heroes of a curriculum-based story. They meet people, discover places and solve problems.

A subscription box comprises a set of 40 wireless headphones, a wireless transmitter and a device like an MP3 player loaded with the experiences. In addition, there are worksheets, differentiated resource packs and a starter guide. The transmitter also connects to devices like tablets and laptops, so teachers can be creative and play any audio to students.

Nicky Waterson is head of learning technology and resources at Southfield School, a special school for students aged 11 to 19 in Bradford. She came across now>press>play at BETT and immediately recognised its potential. 'The technology is simple,' she says, 'and the boys didn't even object to the pink headphones. The only issue has been reliable access to the hall or dance studio, but as the transmitter has a range of 80 metres, we were able to work outside in the summer.'

Noise and interruptions are problems in any special school: people walk into the classroom at any time, a child shouts out, a phone rings or someone needs the toilet. Mrs Waterson plays music on the smart board and gets students working on brain gym, but some of them still make noises that disrupt the lesson. However, there are no such distractions when they wear headphones, although they are still able to move around and see each other. 'Each experience has its own immersive background of sounds: voices, animals and weather. It really absorbs them,' she comments.

Sessions are easy to organise: students put on the headphones, find a space to stand, switch to the correct channel, adjust the volume and when they are all ready, Mrs Waterson presses 'Play'. 'It can seem strange to see them all sitting in absolute silence,' she says, 'faces intent and listening. Then all of a sudden, they get up and perform the same actions almost in unison as they respond to the experience. For example, in the *Water Cycle* they are told to head north or refill a water bottle, and they mime it.'



Children react powerfully to the experiences

The school trialled the resource with three classes simultaneously, and some of the students involved had behavioural difficulties. One student receiving one-to-one support with a bespoke curriculum surprised his teacher when he began directing others. 'He used receptive language skills, followed instructions, engaged with strangers and asked to use the experiences again,' says Mrs Waterson. 'He now joins other classes on a regular basis and his PSHE, social, emotional and communication targets have really improved.'

Feedback from other students was also positive, including from those who might opt out of anything new or scary. A girl in Year 7 who is often disengaged loved the 'acting together', reporting that 'We got water for the village' as opposed to 'I got water', demonstrating her inclusion in the group.

Mrs Waterson explains the impact. 'The experiences are kinaesthetic and develop empathetic feelings that are more immersive than watching a film. When encountering a drought situation, students turned an empty water bottle upside down and made thirsty sounds. When asked to knock a dam down, they went at it hell for leather. This led to a discussion about flooding, disasters and current events, where they compared themselves with children from Ethiopia.'

'It is reassuring for some students to repeat experiences,' she continues, 'because they begin to predict what happens next. Sometimes I stop the

experience after five minutes and do something else related to the theme, or encourage students to make up their own stories. It could easily form the basis for a half term cross-curricular topic.' Cross-curricular opportunities include getting students to draw visual maps of what they 'saw': in this case, the village, dam and mountains.

Mrs Waterson feels that students at levels P7/8 engage well with the resources but believes that students at levels P5/6 would get confused. She is planning to create her own simple stories for teaching colours, directions and following instructions. Meanwhile, the developers at now>press>play are taking SENCO suggestions on board and working with an advisor to produce resources specifically for students with SEND.

A now>press>play subscription for a mainstream two-form-entry school is £2,000 a year for equipment, access to all experiences and a training session, although it is less for schools with fewer students. For a free demo, visit www.nowpressplay.co.uk



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