

Case Study: Catherine Simpson
Student: Helen O'Grady Drama Academy

Young people across the United Kingdom are now facing their biggest challenge with exams and career choices.

It's a stressful period for many of them and having a strong self-belief and inner confidence helps to transform it into a positive experience.

Schools often do not have the time or resources to focus strongly on the development of this inner belief. And for young people like Catherine Simpson, that development has been nurtured at the Helen O'Grady Drama Academy.

Catherine, now nearly 18, has been a student at the Academy class in Bristol since she was five-years-old. There, she has found a growing self-confidence and strength of character.

Catherine says: "I feel very confident now and feel that I could go into any situation – a job interview for example – and be able to deal with whatever came up. I'd know that I would speak clearly and confidently and say the right things. I'd be quick to respond on the spot to difficult questions.

"At school we were not taught how to do this and while the Academy does not use drama as a direct way to learn how to be interviewed, it helps so much with confidence and thinking creatively!"

Through the Academy's structured programme, a child can go from entry at five-years-old to the final year at 17 and never repeat a class routine. They gain confidence and communications skills through speech, movement, improvisation and theatre games.

The Academy's National Director Nigel Le Page says: "Most drama schools will have some sort of package for their teachers and most offer singing, dancing and acting. We are probably the only one that is purely focussed on a child's self-development."

"A child can also come in at any stage and not feel isolated. The Academy builds a very strong sense of community among its pupils. They learn mutual respect and tolerance."

The Academy now covers 60 per cent of the UK but the desire to expand this rare social enterprise has opened opportunities for people to take on the challenge of establishing branches in the rest of the country, particularly in the Midlands, North and South West. Nigel believes strongly that there is a need in the UK for another 30 branches, offering self-development to 20-24,000 children.

Catherine remembers her beginnings at the Academy: "I was about five-years-old when I first started going to the Helen O'Grady Drama Academy. It was my mum's idea – I had dreams of being an actress, as children sometimes do. The Academy was opening its first branch in Redland, Bristol and I went with my mum to the first session and enrolled.

"I remember being quite nervous even though I was used to being with other children at school but the Principal, Alison Mazanec, made me feel at ease. She had asked me to draw some pictures of myself. I honestly don't remember much more about that first session but I did enjoy it – it was just good fun. I was less confident for the first couple of sessions but after that it became so creative that I wanted to continue.

"Alison was a complete role model when I was growing up. I really looked up to her and now we are more like good friends. It is a great place to just get away from everything else and a great way to make new friends. I've made so many good friends in my time and have kept in contact with most of them. My best friend still goes to the Academy sessions.

"You always meet new people at the Academy and have to work with them I used to be quite shy but now I feel much more confident in most situations. I can strike up a conversation with anyone and feel able to talk about almost anything.

"There are many reasons why I like going to the classes. You get to meet new people and learn how to work with them. The theatre games are also so much fun. You can be working with just two people from a script or improvising as a group around two or three main ideas. It's great watching what others do with their scripts as well. You learn all the time and you never do the same thing twice. We also act in one main play each year.

"I also really like the fact that the classes are not competitive. I don't like competing against my friends and in the Academy everyone is working together as a team all the time."

Catherine's twelfth year at the Academy will be marked by a special award.

Catherine is now taking a gap year and plans to travel before she goes to university to study Psychology.

She says: "I did consider taking Drama at university but felt that in the end I did not want to turn something that was a hobby and that I loved into a career, which could be quite stressful. It would take all the fun out of it. But I do think there will be opportunities to use all I've learnt at the Academy in the future, maybe in a therapeutic way. Whatever happens, I have confidence to adapt.

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