**Making Public Partnerships fun**

**The Creative Learning Abilities Partnership (CLAPS)**

<https://arc-eoe.nihr.ac.uk/research-implementation/research-themes/inclusive-involvement-research/creative-learning-abilities>

Amander Wellings and Fred Inglis presented The Creative Learning Abilities Partnership (CLAPS) project and shared their reflections.

CLAPS aims to build health and social care research collaborations and working in partnership with two local Mencap organisations - Barnet Mencap in North London, and Lowestoft and District Mencap (The Unity Centre) in Suffolk. The project was not research itself but developing partnerships for inclusive involvement with people with learning disabilities and/ or autism. Often there is a failure to effectively engage the perspectives of these groups. Individuals with learning disabilities and autistic people, are more likely to experience poor physical and mental health, and have shorter lives compared to the general population. The aims of the project were to work together, codesign and create workshops to explore health and social care priorities in a fun and creative way, generating ideas together for future research.

Partnership building was described as like a journey across stepping stones. There were no pre-conceived ideas of what would happen at the workshops – they developed from the ideas of the previous workshop. This coproduction was ‘messy’ but enabled the involvement of Mencap members in designing the workshops rather than sessions being controlled by the project team. It was about everybody working at their own pace - Amander and Fred didn't want anyone to ‘fall in the water’ and for everyone to complete the journey together.

Both Mencap organisations really enjoyed music so musical interludes were included in all workshops. This involved doing an activity and then taking some time out to play music, sing along and dance. The team explored what was important to people about their health and well-being and what was fun for them. Workshops also included playing a Breakfast-themed bingo game. This was introduced after one member said breakfast was “the most important meal of the day,” and another said they liked playing bingo.

Two cuddly toy mascots were used in the project - Barnaby the Barnet Bee, and Eunice the Unicorn. Using the mascots, the project team could talk about sensitive topics with the toys being used to lighten the mood. This approach originated from observations of some Mencap members bringing their own cuddly toys to sessions, and communicating through them.

An event was held in Cambridge that brought the two Mencap organisations, advisory group, and the project team together to celebrate what the partnerships had achieved. A video from the event was played, showing everybody having fun with drumming, dancing and dressing up. In the video, a Mencap member shared how much her confidence had grown during the project and enabled her to stand at the front and talk to everyone.

Amander spoke of how the team always did a ‘check-in’ and ‘check-out’ at the start and end of workshops to see how people were feeling. The team shared feedback from one Mencap member, who said: *“the way you come down here and you spend time with us, you help us to see the light at the end and it helps us to feel better in ourselves before we go home.”*

**Project Reflections:**

When discussing how research is shared, Mencap members felt that articles including photos made information a lot more accessible. The conventional journal articles were seen as “for scientists”.

Amander reflected on the importance of face-to-face interactions with the Mencap groups, in their community settings. She felt the project would not have had the same impact if done online as a large part of the success was based upon the team having a year to build relationships with the Mencap organisations and people within it. It was noted that for people with learning disabilities, art, music etc made communication fun, and easier. These methods would not have worked ‘virtually’. Using creative methods with people, broke down hierarchies and barriers. It enabled people to be involved because they could see that what they were doing was something fun.

As a result of this work, the team reflected that good PPIE needs time. ‘Parachuting’ into organisations (e.g. just doing one visit) will not produce high quality results.

Instead, it was felt that you needed at least two sessions to get the best out of people.

The team are keen to apply for more funding to continue the partnerships built through this Programme Development Grant, including the important voices of people with learning disabilities and/or autism in research about them. However, it was noted that there was not a clear pathway for moving with the partnerships towards a larger programme of research. Acknowledging that funding applications take time, the team feel it is important to gain interim funding to continue the work of the partnerships.

CLAPS co-lead Julia Jones shared that the project had a fantastic advisory group, including people with learning disabilities and autistic people who advised the team throughout the project. This included helping to develop easy read, accessible materials. Julia said that in Public Involvement it is important to be clear about the purpose of the project, the aims, and what will happen if people want to be involved. It was thought this had been well managed throughout and was reflected in the celebration event. The celebration event started from an idea that came from the early work with the Mencap organisations and them telling the team that they love a party, and so this was built into the funding application.

Amander said that a logic model that would feed into future research questions had also been developed. This was seen as important because it *“was telling that group and working out with that group that research shouldn't be about them without them. So it's really, really emphasizing the importance of public involvement in research around this, around this group and the whole idea that if they're not involved in the team that's designing the research, then how a service is going to fit their needs at the end. There was a lot of talk about the services don't fit. And it was sort of, it was empowering them to realise that that by doing the work that we do, that they'll have their say in, in, in how services are created with them.”*

The CLAPS project involved 10 workshops and every time they came together they would have a countdown together of what number workshop this was, *“so we'd say, oh, this is what happened at the last workshop. This is what we're now going to do with it. And make sure that that was clear all the way through, that their voice was being listened to. And we'd like write things up. We had things that were called creativi-trees and where they put their ideas on leaves on trees. And we created theme branches and whatever, and then we joined those two trees together. So we had a tree from Lowestoft. We had a tree from Barnet and we joined their ideas together and then we showed them the ideas back. And before we put anything on a post-it note we sort of like say, is that what you meant? Because we'd be writing the ideas down and we wanted to make sure that we that we captured their ideas. It was a lot of reframing and making sure that the ideas are captured in the right way as to what they actually meant rather than what we thought.”*

The team will look at these logic models and make sure that they reflect what the groups need and do some more workshops, putting ideas together and hopefully bring researchers into those workshops and get everybody working together. Podcast equipment was bought from funding from the project, which was delayed. Both groups have now started utilising these resources.

There were reflections from others in the groups about what it is to be a member of the public giving an opinion, or a research participant and that difficulty of people knowing what role they were in. From a research point of view and ethically there needed to be the distinction for consent, but this was an engagement project.

Reflecting on the Celebration Event, the team did not know what would happen when the two Mencap organisations came together. Also the challenges those with learning disabilities and autism may have with being at an event where they have never met anybody and do not know what will happen. The original application for this project was very fluid so that the team could be responsive to what was needed and what was happening, *“we had this freedom to change things as we went along and I think that was really important and I think we could do that with this sort of work. As if it was a piece of research, you might not be able to be as fluent in the design.”*

There were discussions about how Mencap members were supported to attend the workshops and the celebration event where they got a £20 voucher for attending the sessions. Amander said that the members now understand that they can have an impact *“So they've got the why and they've got the reason why their voice is important to be included and they understand that. We felt listened to, we felt included. We felt part of this. We've never been allowed to be part of this sort of thing before. They want to continue with it because they've enjoyed being listened to and these are people that have been marginalised, a lot of them through all their lives. A huge thing in what we're doing is to encourage them to actually say what they want and what they need. Rather than have people speak for them and to give them the confidence to say what they want and what they need in whichever way is easy for them to say that.”*

The discussion moved onto the importance of using methods to give people a voice that they wouldn't normally have, and researchers being open to the ways in which they work with underserved groups and about this being a continuous learning process. For this and other projects it was important to learn and value the ways in which people feel comfortable in talking and acting. It was noted how sometimes research experience for participants can be horrible and researchers need to really be aware and mindful about what they do, and having that respect for people's comfort zones,“*We need to learn from you and with you”.*  It was also important to keep people in the loop as an equal in what is happening and trying to break down the barriers between being a researcher from a university and someone with really valuable lived experience, and creating an enjoyable experience and to ‘sell’ it the right way**.**