

# Case study

## *Defy Gravity!*

### Details

**What:**

Through the Artist in Residence program, senior students at Red Hill Special School, carers and teachers collaborated with artists from Flipside Circus on a project designed to allow these students to engage and perform outside the prism of their disability.

Students, worked with Flipside staff, using portable circus equipment including balls, parachutes, juggling rings, spin sticks, shaker cups, juggling scarves and spinning plates. The students had individual movement and communication restrictions, and learning was very much led by the students' interest and guided by circus trainers. The program supported what the students could do, not what their disability prevented them from doing.

The students worked to develop a performance at the Flipside Circus performance space and, as the program progressed, the students became circus performers. The performance, *Defy Gravity!* was physically challenging for the performers and included the use of specialist equipment developed to meet the needs of individual students. The performance included trampoline, suspended and swinging in tissues and being harnessed metres off the ground.

**When:**

September 2013 to April 2014

**Where:**

Red Hill Special School, Queensland



*Davy teaches ball juggling, Red Hill Special School. Photo by Flipside Circus.*

**Key stats:**

- 20 students all 14 years or older with high and complex physical, intellectual and multiple disabilities
- 20 teachers and aides
- 6 artists

**Arts Queensland contribution:**

\$19,000 – Artist in Residence program

**Contact for further information:**

Flipside Circus

Phone: (07) 3352 7233

Website: <http://www.flipsidecircus.org.au/>

## Outcomes

- Project provided opportunities for students to expand physical capabilities and develop strong connections with trainers in order to succeed.
- Increased partnership skill development; students were encouraged to explore circus skills and drive the creative process when devising the performance piece with teachers and trainers becoming guides to the process.
- Increased professional development for teachers; new techniques were developed to engage the students and support their learning. The project broadened teachers expectations of the potential of students to engage in activities and experience never before considered.
- Increased professional development for artists; new ways to connect with students with severe physical disabilities and limited verbal capacity were explored. Trainers embraced the use of mobility equipment and acts were developed that incorporated wheelchairs and walkers.
- Project increased the public value of arts and creativity to develop learning and life skills through the performance *Defy Gravity!* New skills were showcased and students were identified with roles outside of their disability – they were jugglers, aerialists and members of a circus troupe.



*Bayaraa working on some hat manipulation, Red Hill Special School. Photo by Flipside Circus.*

## Learnings and reflections

The collaborative process between the artists of Flipside Circus and the team of teachers, carers and teacher aides at Red Hill Special School was important to the success of the project.

Flipside Circus artists found that teachers were central to the project. Throughout the project there was a lot of knowledge sharing between the circus trainers and the teachers. This was particularly important during the first months of the project.

*'Throughout this process the teachers and trainers were engaging in an inclusive but non-invasive way with the students. Students were watching and realising they were in a safe place where they could take risks and the ice was melting and they were learning that they were safe with the trainers.'*

*Meanwhile, the trainers were watching the teachers and learning different ways to communicate with each of the students and beginning to earn trust with the students and teachers.'*

*The artists themselves were unprepared for the emotional and rewarding nature of the work. Working to develop a bond with the students, connecting with them and then seeing them reach their potential brought a sense of achievement that was unexpected.*