



A collaborative research project during the 2014-2015 school year between: cultural providers and the Royal Opera House Bridge; Billericay Teaching School Alliance and 18 teachers and their enablers from 13 primary schools in Essex; and academic staff from the Department of Education at Anglia Ruskin University.

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October 2015

# CREATIVE WRITING THROUGH THE ARTS (CWttA)

## Final Summary Report October 2015



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**Final Summary Report**  
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**Introduction**

This is a final summary report<sup>1</sup> of a research project which took place throughout the 2014-15 academic year. The project was innovative in its design and represents collaboration between: cultural providers and the Royal Opera House Bridge; Billericay Teaching School Alliance and the 18 teachers and their enablers from 13 primary schools; and academic staff from the Department of Education at Anglia Ruskin University.

The fundamental aim of the project was to promote children's creative writing skills through the use of music, drama and illustration activities in classrooms. The project was also designed to enable the professional development of early career teachers, through workshops and school visits from creative practitioners and action research workshops with academic staff. Finally, the project aspired to assess the value of creative learning in schools and raise awareness of the value of working in partnership with the cultural sector to develop curriculum and pedagogy.

**Project design**

This was a one year project carried out with 18 early career primary school teachers in 13 schools in Essex working across classes from Reception to Year 6. The average class size was 30 children, so that in total some 540 children were able to benefit directly from the project.

Schools within the locality were contacted in summer 2014 and invited to apply to join the project. Thirteen of thirty seven schools (35%) took this opportunity, and agreed to:

- Support an early career teacher to attend development days
- Support this teacher to carry out an action research project
- Release the teacher from school, with funding for cover costs where needed
- Appoint an enabler from the senior staff at the school to facilitate the success of the project, support the early career teacher, and to attend an initial information day and a final celebration day

This positive move on the part of the schools to 'sign up' to the project signalled commitment to creative learning and cultural engagement and was important for achieving outcomes.

Schools identified one or two early career teachers to be part of the project and these teachers, along with their enabler, attended an information day in July 2014. This event served to set the scene for the project, to explain the requirements and expected outcomes, and to provide key dates for the year. During the 2014–2015 academic year the early career teachers attended events to support them with using drama, music and illustration activities

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<sup>1</sup>A more detailed final report is also available, in electronic format, on request.

within their teaching. Creative practitioners facilitated these three one-day events (one at the beginning of each school term). On each of these days the teachers had an opportunity to engage with practical music, drama and illustration tasks that extended their own skills and provided ideas for ways of working with the children in their classes. All of the early career teachers then had follow up visits from the creative practitioners to their schools (for team-teaching and curriculum planning) to enable activities and ideas to be embedded at school level.

The early career teachers also attended workshops to support them to design and carry out small-scale action research projects. These were facilitated by academic staff from Anglia Ruskin University. An initial training day focussed upon understandings of action research. Termly twilight sessions, two-hour early evening meetings, then supported the early career teachers to refine research questions, identify potential evidence, carry out their project and draw conclusions. These research projects enabled teachers to collect data and to support judgements about how the changes they had made in their teaching had benefitted the children and influenced their writing. A final celebration day was held for the participants to display and share their work from the project.

The Royal Opera House Bridge (as active investor, broker and advocate for the project) engaged skilful creative practitioners, via prominent arts organisations, including: an Advanced Skills Teacher for music, seconded from her school to Essex Music Hub; actors from Make Believe Arts; and visual artists from House of Illustration. They led professional development activities with the early career teachers (creative arts training days and follow-up school visits). Their contributions were vital to the project's success.

We were fortunate during the project to be able to make use of the Creative Learning Zone at Grange Primary School, Wickford, as an ideal venue for workshops and meetings, and also Wickford Collaborative Learning Centre (CLC) to enable the first and final events to take place. During the project the Director of Billericay Teaching School Alliance acted as the project lead, forming a central communication point with all collaborators and participants.

The team from Anglia Ruskin University carried out the evaluation of the project as a whole, according to the following timetable:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Project inception and planning, engagement of collaborators   |  |
| Identification and sign up of schools July 2014   |  |
| Initial data collection from schools  |  |
| Workshops and visits from Creative Practitioners, one workshop and visit per term per teacher, Music, Drama, Illustration | Workshops on Action Research, one per term                             |
| Data collection from visits   | Data collection from teachers and progress reports from their projects |
| Celebration day, June 2015  |  |
| Final data collection from schools and projects   |  |
| Project completion and publication of final evaluation reports, Autumn 2015   |  |

**Methods of data collection and analysis**

A range of data was collected against the different elements of the project. This included: initial and final self-evaluations from schools; questionnaires to early career teachers; summary comments from teachers regarding the benefits of the project to the children, themselves and to the school; the teachers' own notes and summaries of their action research projects; observation notes made during visits and workshops; plus presentations and feedback from the final celebration day. Sixteen of the initial eighteen teachers submitted all aspects of the data requested. All schools involved in the project submitted completed self-evaluation tools. The different types of data were analysed separately and then collectively to identify the main findings and consider these against the project aims.

## **Main findings**

The main findings from the project are outlined below in relation to the project aims: benefits to children (with particular reference to writing skills); benefits for early career teachers; and benefits for the participating schools (specific to promoting cultural learning).

### ***Benefits to children***

The main focus for this project was to promote children's attainment in writing through creative engagement with cultural activities. Evidence from the action research projects carried out by the early career teachers demonstrates the positive effects that the various interventions have had within their classes.

A dominant theme to emerge from the projects related to the **quality of children's writing**, particularly children's increased use of **description**, with richness of **ideas and imagination**. Increased descriptive detail in writing was shown across all age ranges, as was skill in describing characters and settings. Description of feeling and emotions was elicited through the use of music and drama. All art forms were found to be beneficial for generating ideas and stimulating imaginative responses across different genres of writing. This included a wider range of ideas for writing and the ability to extend ideas and to combine ideas in novel ways. Additional cognitive abilities and **thinking** skills were demonstrated through the creative writing through the arts processes, particularly sensory awareness, plus skills in comprehension, reasoning and organisation of information.

More specific and measurable **writing skills** were also noted in the ways that children learned to **structure** their writing, their effective **use of vocabulary** and the development of **figurative language**. Clear openings and endings were identified as improved elements in the structure of stories, descriptive writing and factual writing. Drama activities were linked with effective planning of writing, plot development and punctuation; whilst use of paragraphing and subheadings to structure factual writing was promoted through illustration.

Teachers also identified **transferable skills**, positive **dispositions towards writing** and other characteristics that were important for children's progress. They cited independence in learning, increased engagement and motivation to write, with greater enjoyment of lessons and activities and raised confidence of the children in their own ability to tackle writing tasks.

**Progress** in writing was difficult to quantify, as the new National Curriculum brought changes in the ways that attainment was measured. All children who were monitored as part of the project were found to make **expected progress or more** in writing. Whilst this improvement cannot be attributed solely to the project, as there were other variables that may account for pupil progress, nevertheless the teachers felt confident that the enrichment provided through creative approaches to teaching had a positive effect on children's writing. Raised attainment was regularly reported for **reluctant writers** and for children in receipt of **pupil premium** and some teachers commented specifically upon benefits for **boys**, highlighting positive changes in their attitudes towards writing and consequent progress.

### ***Benefits to teachers***

The focus upon early career teachers was of importance to the project. In England, retention of teachers in the state maintained sector is low, with more than 1 in 4 teachers leaving the profession during their first five years. Valuing teachers and providing opportunities for professional development at this stage of their careers is therefore an important strategy. Being involved in the project enabled the early career teachers to participate in termly arts workshops from cultural providers and to have a visit each term from one practitioner (different each term) to support implementation of ideas for creative learning into their particular classroom context.

At each of the action research twilight meetings, participating teachers completed a response sheet in relation to perceived benefits from participating in the project and, at the final meeting drew the 'journey' of their project, indicating key points in the year. They also reported their experiences through their blog reports. At the outset of the project, and prior to each of the professional development days, there were mixed emotions. Whilst there was widespread interest and excitement, some of the teachers expressed anxiety about what the project would involve. Several teachers were self-conscious about their lack of skill in one or more of the art forms. Some teachers initially had concerns about the amount of work involved. These fears were allayed by clear communication during the briefing day and the opportunity for questions and answers during the action research twilight sessions. The facilitative and inclusive style of all professional development sessions was appreciated by the teachers. By the end of the project all were inspired through creativity.

The project benefitted teachers in terms of: reinforcing a positive **professional identity**; supporting dedication to inclusion and **achievement**; and offering learning and teaching **strategies and approaches** for planning and implementation within the new curriculum.

In their blogs, the teachers expressed a strong sense of **professional identity** and emergent personal philosophies of learning and teaching. They were keen to be inspiring and creative teachers and to instil a love of learning in pupils. They recognised the knowledge, skills and other attributes demanded of teachers and were motivated to use the project to develop these. Several teachers saw the project as a shared journey of discovery and emphasised the importance of teachers as learners and as co-learners with children. The early career teachers were open-minded and prepared to take risks in order to discover what would work well in their classrooms. All were inspired. Teachers who were already musicians, actors or artists

reinforced this aspect of their identity and enjoyed drawing upon their particular skills and interests. Others saw an awakening of their own imagination and a developing confidence and enthusiasm for teaching arts subjects and teaching writing through the arts

Linked to this, the early career teachers were idealistic in wanting to make a difference in children's lives with a strong commitment to support all children to achieve to their full potential. Music, drama and illustration provided a means of realising this through creative learning to interest and engage pupils of all ages and abilities. Teachers saw the creative arts as areas in which all children could achieve and some could excel. They were motivated when they saw children inspired, engaged, enjoying learning and making better than expected progress in their writing. Seeing and noting the children's **achievement** and progress in writing through the year was a source of professional pride and gave the teachers a sense of accomplishment.

The use of creative arts provided teachers with many ideas for new experiences to provide for children. The professional development days for music, drama and illustration all boosted teacher's skills in teaching these areas of the curriculum and in using creative arts to inspire writing. In a year in which the new National Curriculum was introduced, teachers gained a huge number of new ideas for activities, **strategies and approaches** for planning and implementing lessons, in writing and across the curriculum. Teachers identified that they learned techniques for delivering creative lessons that were successful during the project and that they would continue to use in the future.

The project provided teachers with dedicated time to devote to this aspect of their development, which was beneficial, as was the opportunity to work with a range of professionals within and beyond their schools, Networking between early career teachers at the action research twilight sessions and the creative workshops was very evident, and is likely to have contributed positively to the success of the project. Teachers also gained confidence in action research and the use of enquiry to support reflection on their teaching.

The self-assurance gained by the teachers through the project was identified in the school self-evaluation reports. The enablers saw increasing confidence and developing leadership within the teachers. In several cases, an individual teacher's engagement with the project resulted in them becoming facilitators and leaders for the arts with whole school impact.

### ***Benefits to schools***

Schools began the project from different starting points as some were already highly committed to the arts and to creative approaches to learning and teaching whilst others were keen to develop in this area. Teachers and enablers, together, were asked to complete a 'Whole School Self-Evaluation Tool' in order to rate engagement with 'Creative and Cultural Learning' at the start and at the end of the project. This tool comprised three subscales with indicators of 'emergent practice', 'established practice' and 'innovative practice'. For each subscale there were eight descriptive statements which the enabler and teacher rated according to whether that aspect of creative learning was not met (score of 0), partially met (score of 1) or fully met (score of 2). This indicated whereabouts they thought their school was

on a continuum which culminated in excellent and innovative practice for cultural engagement. Total scores on the emergent and innovative subscales significantly increased ( $p < 0.05$ , see detail in full report) demonstrating that across the schools staff considered they had moved closer to the highest point on the scale of 'excellent and innovative practice'. There was also an increase on the subscale for 'established practice', although the overall results for this were not significant. This is not surprising given the relatively short duration of the project and the expectation that established practice would not be identified until the new academic year.

In addition to the second school self-evaluation tool, participating schools were also asked to provide free-text responses to questions about the impact of the project. These replies, together with benefits reported by the early teachers on response sheets, through their illustrated journeys and in the action research reports, indicated the value of the project for schools as a whole. In all of this data, themes of **creativity**, **confidence** and increased **skills** were prominent.

There was evidence of expansion of **creativity** in all schools with elevation of the status of arts subjects and appreciation of the importance of creative arts both for their own sake and to support learning across the curriculum. A feature of the project was the sharing of creative activities, learned on the professional development days, when planning with colleagues in year groups and across curriculum areas. This meant that creative techniques were incorporated regularly in teaching throughout year groups and phases. In some schools creative arts were used to inspire writing throughout the school, with ideas and successes shared at staff meetings, in school assemblies and on dedicated display boards.

Gains in **confidence** were evident in all schools. The early career teachers and their colleagues became less self-conscious and more willing to experiment with arts activities as inspiration for writing. Teachers became more confident in their understanding and articulation of the importance of different arts forms as means of communication and expression. Early career teachers' confidence was also evidenced by their willingness to participate pro-actively in planning with others and their ability to present their work from the project to motivate colleagues. In turn, other teachers became more confident and proactive in suggesting ideas for creative learning and teaching, especially using drama. Children, too, showed increased confidence to participate in arts activities and to write and share their writing with others.

Throughout the project teachers and children used and developed existing **skills** and learned new ones. As shown above, the project had a positive impact upon children's ability and willingness to write; targets for literacy were met and exceeded by children at different levels of attainment. Teachers had the opportunity to use their talents in music, drama and arts and to share ideas and approaches to develop the skills of colleagues. Early career teachers not only increased their own skills in arts subjects, through the workshops and follow-up visits, but also fostered the skills of others. This emerging leadership amongst the early career teachers, as a result of participation in the project, was of benefit to the school and also enabled early career teachers to develop skills for further, future leadership roles.

### ***Next steps***

Overall, engagement with a collaborative cultural learning project has: supported children to develop writing skills through creative arts; enabled early career teachers to lead and research an area of learning for their school; and shown the value of creative learning in schools, in particular the benefits of working in partnership with the cultural sector to develop curriculum and pedagogy. There is commitment to continue the work of the project.

Although the 'Creative Writing through the Arts' project has ended, schools have plans for development. All schools intend to disseminate the project throughout the school and several had specific plans for the early career teacher(s) to lead implementation of creative writing through the arts at year group and whole school level. In addition there were commitments to review the place of arts in the curriculum as a whole and to extend extra-curricular arts activities.

School head teachers also had plans to develop external partnerships and links, in order to enhance creative and cultural learning. For example, schools were planning visits from creative practitioners and trips to theatres, museums and galleries and considering setting up and extending collaborative partnerships with other schools.

### **Summary findings**

In summary, the findings demonstrate benefit to children, teachers and schools:

- Children developed open-ended writing skills including: powers of description; ideas and imagination; thought processes and reasoning ability
- Children developed technical writing skills: structure; vocabulary; and elements of writing style, such as use of figurative language
- Children derived other benefits: independent learning, engagement and enjoyment; confidence in independent writing; enhanced quality and quantity of writing
- Children made expected progress or more and this was particularly noted for previously reluctant writers
  
- Teachers' positive professional identity was reinforced
- Teachers were motivated when they saw children inspired, engaged with learning and making better than expected progress in their writing.
- Teachers gained many new ideas for activities, plus strategies for planning and implementing creative lessons, in writing and across the new National Curriculum
- Teachers increased in confidence and some showed leadership in facilitating the arts across a year group, or Key Stage or throughout the school
  
- Schools' engagement with creative and cultural learning' has increased
- Schools reported expansion of creativity with increased use of creative teaching techniques by early career teachers and their colleagues
- Schools have seen gains in teachers' confidence in teaching through the arts and also children's confidence to participate in arts activities and to write

- Schools have appreciated the growth in skills of early career teachers, including experience and aptitude for future leadership roles.

The Creative Writing through the Arts project team was proud to be awarded the 2015 British Educational Research Association / British Curriculum Foundation Routledge Taylor-Francis Curriculum Journal prize: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/news/2015-berabcfrouledge-taylor-francis-curriculum-journal-prize>

The project has generated a strong collaboration and a sense of successful engagement between schools and academic and cultural providers to support the professional development of early career teachers, to promote creative learning and to foster children's writing skills. Discussion with all stakeholders in October 2015 will inform decisions about the next steps to take this project forward.

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