

Young City Poets

Evaluation report 2019

In 2018/19, Young City Poets reached 35 teachers and 877 pupils across 32 schools in London, boosting students' enjoyment, confidence and skills in poetry, building their creativity and providing them with positive experiences working with creative professionals.

Finding	Key statistic
Students are better at writing poetry and have more positive attitudes towards it as a result of taking part in Young City Poets	81% of students told us that they are now better at writing poetry as a result of taking part in Young City Poets. Almost 3 times as many pupils think poetry is brilliant or fun at the end of the project than did before. In the words of one student, "poems are a form of art which are amazing".
Students have improved attitudes towards writing in general as a result of taking part in Young City Poets	66% of students say that they now like writing more as a result of taking part in Young City Poets.
Students are more creative and show some improvements in critical thinking as a result of taking part in Young City Poets	16 out of 17 teachers told us that the project has helped their students think more creatively.
The visit to the cultural venue was a valuable experience for students	50% of students told their family and friends about the visit when they got home and many thought that the visit was fun and strengthened their sense of place and belonging.
The workshop with a professional poet had a positive impact	Students described meeting the poet as fun (50%) or enjoyable (42%). It also boosted students' confidence: meeting the poet "made me more confident at performing my poem."

Background

Over the last five years, the National Literacy Trust has been trialling and developing a writing programme that supports the most disadvantaged children to enjoy and improve their writing. We are very grateful to our partners at Culture Mile Learning and the Tower of London who enable us to work with some of the most renowned cultural venues in London to improve children's writing.

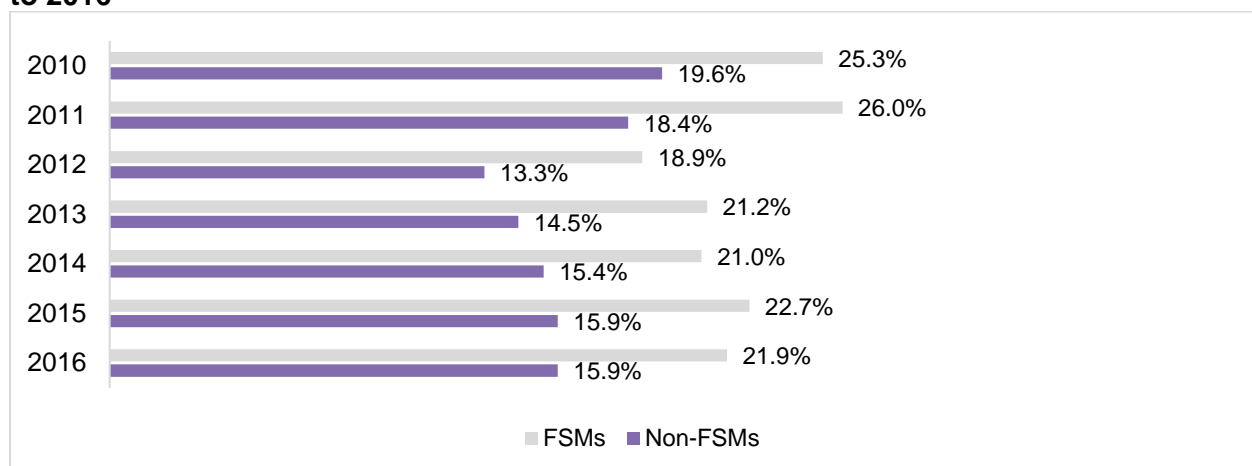
We would also like to extend our thanks to the funders who made Young City Poets possible in 2018/19: Culture Mile, Historic Royal Palaces and the Allen and Nesta Charitable Trust.

Why poetry?

Poetry is enjoying a boom, particularly among young people (Nielsen BookScan, 2019). Its rise in popularity has been attributed in part to the ease with which it can be shared on social media and the success of 'InstaPoets'.

Our research has consistently demonstrated that more pupils on free school meals (or FSMs - our proxy of socioeconomic background) read and write poetry in their free time than their peers from more advantaged backgrounds (see Figure 1).

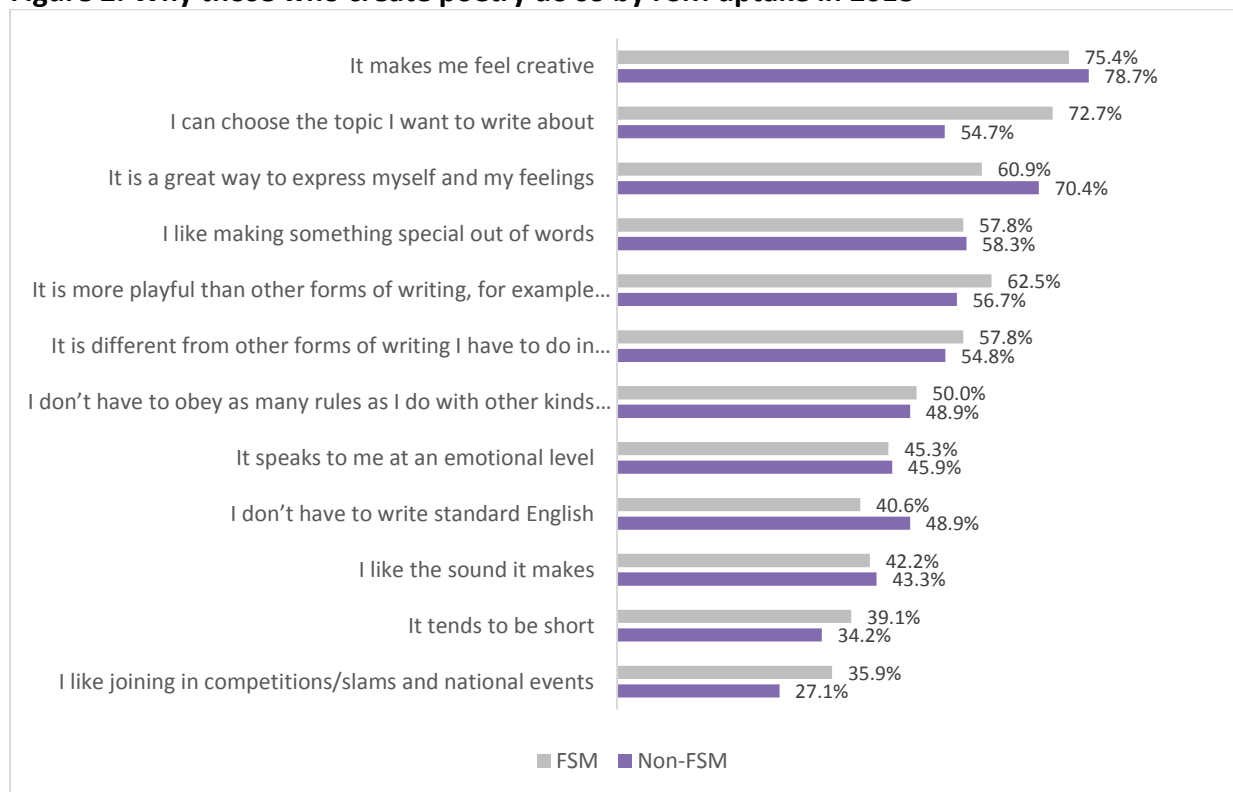
Figure 1: Reading poems outside class at least once a month by FSM uptake in 2010 to 2016



The same still holds true even when we look at reading poems digitally or in print. For example, data from 2019 showed us that pupils who receive FSMs are more likely than their non-FSM peers to say that they read poems on screen in their free time (14.1% vs. 9.5%)

In 2018, we produced a report for National Poetry Day that investigated this further. Almost half (46.1%) of the 2,948 children and young people surveyed told us that they engage with poetry in their free time. We found it was consistently the case that children who write poetry in their own time (regardless of whether they receive free school meals or not) chose to do so because it provided a creative outlet. However, children receiving free school meals were more likely to value the sense of self-agency poetry offered in enabling them to choose the topic, the playfulness of the form and its brevity (see Figure 2). They were also more likely to enjoy participating in poetry slams or competitions.

Figure 2: Why those who create poetry do so by FSM uptake in 2018



The aim of Young City Poets is to engage reluctant writers because we know that by improving young people’s enjoyment of and attitudes towards writing, we will see a positive impact on their writing skills. At the same time, we know that children who receive free school meals are disproportionately likely to underachieve in writing tests at the end of KS2¹ and in their English GCSE². As highlighted above, our research has shown that poetry is a format that already resonates with this demographic, and we therefore use poetry as means of engaging young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to help improve their writing³.

Our three pillar approach

Based on existing research and evaluation of our own programmes, we have established a three pillar model for writing. Every school participating in Young City Poets is provided with support to use each of these to help improve students’ engagement with poetry. Our three pillars are:

Memorable experiences

Teachers are excellent at teaching writing, but it can be difficult to find the ‘spark’ or inspiration which motivates their students to want to write. School visits to galleries,

¹ Department for Education (2018) [Key stage 2 and multi-academy trust performance, 2018 \(revised\)](#)

² Department for Education (2018) [GCSE results for England, 2018 \(provisional\)](#)

³ National Literacy Trust (2018) [A thing that makes me happy: Children, young people and poetry in 2018](#)

museums and heritage sites help bring learning to life for pupils, often providing new creative experiences and supporting them to become learners outside the classroom.

Children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to visit galleries, museums and heritage sites⁴ and worryingly, school trips are in decline (DCMS 2016, ASCL 2018). However, EEF (2014; 2018)⁵ found that writing approaches which use a memorable experience as the inspiration for writing helped children who struggled with writing to make additional progress.

Working with a professional writer

There is an increasing amount of work being done to explore the potential impact of writer visits and the most effective ways that professional writers can support learning. Most recently, we published a report which demonstrated a positive relationship between children who reported working with a writer in school, and increased levels of enjoyment and confidence in reading and writing, as well as being more likely to be better at reading (Clark and Lant 2019)⁶. Evaluation of our poetry programmes in London and Bradford have also demonstrated an increase in children's engagement in poetry where they have had the chance to work with a poet.

One reason for this could be that working with a writer provides young people with the opportunity to experience 'real' writing.

“Writers articulate clearly their understanding of the writing process as messy and recursive... This contrasts to children's experiences of the writing process in school which is frequently routinised as a linear, chronological process of plan, draft, revise and edit.” (Cremin, Myhill et al 2017)

In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that meeting a writer can lead to students' increased awareness of writing as a job, which has the potential to build pupils' aspirations for a creative career.

Real audience and purpose

It is well documented that providing a real audience and purpose for children's writing increases their motivation to write (ACE 2019)⁷. In an evaluation of an online self-publishing platform we found that, in addition to increased motivation to write, young people felt more pride in writing they were creating for publication in a book.

We continue to explore meaningful ways to provide a real audience and purpose for students' writing that do not have a disproportionate impact on teachers' workload. Currently we provide opportunities to include students' work in published anthologies ([here is the Young City Poets 2018/19 anthology](#)) and for young people to perform their poems.

⁴ Department for Culture Media and Sport (2016), [The Culture White Paper](#)

⁵ Education Endowment Foundation (2019) Using self-regulation to improve writing

⁶ Clark and Lant (2019), The impact of writer visit on children and young people's reading and writing engagement

⁷ ACE (2019) Using Quality Principles in work for, by and with Children and Young People



Project delivery

Eight cultural venues connected to the City of London took part in the project: **Barbican, The Charterhouse, The City Centre, Keats House, London Metropolitan Archives, Museum of London, Tower Bridge and the Tower of London**. It was the first year The Charterhouse had participated in the project. The Young City Poets project manager worked with education staff at each venue to update, refresh or produce new poetry workshops to be delivered for the schools during the project.

Reflecting on the past four years of the project, it is noticeable that venues who don't specialise in poetry have gained confidence in this area, with each venue delivering a poetry-focused activity during the teacher CPD day. In some cases this has had a wider impact - for example, the Museum of London have built poetry into their primary school offer and the Tower of London include a spoken word stage in their 'Music at the Tower' festival. We have also been able to draw on existing expertise and networks by bringing in professional poets who are actively engaged in Keats House salons and providing Barbican Young Poets with the opportunity to shadow professional poet workshops. Feedback from the cultural partners involved in the project this year has been overwhelmingly positive:

“One of the strongest elements about the project is the way we work as a partnership. I would value an opportunity for the partners to share their 'best practice' in delivering poetry sessions in a peer-to-peer share sessions.”

We delivered training for **35 teachers** at the Museum of London on 4 December 2018 and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with all teachers stating that they would build their learning from the day into their practice.

In total we reached **877 pupils from 32 schools**. This included 12 primary schools, 19 secondary schools and one SEN group (secondary). Schools were located across London, including the boroughs of Barnet, Croydon, Barking and Dagenham and Westminster. There was a high concentration of schools located in Southwark and Tower Hamlets.

We worked with **seven professional poets: Adham Smart, Antosh Wojcik, Clare Mulley, Laura Rae, Laila Sumpton, Momtaza Mehri and Simon Mole**. Their workshops focused on editing and performance to help pupils reach a final version of their poem. Overall these visits were very well received by pupils and teachers. We would like to be able to build the poets into the programme earlier, enabling them to work with the National Literacy Trust and cultural venues to develop the workshops and ensure that their workshops in school build on this effectively, and to meet the teachers sooner so that the poet workshop can be embedded in the teacher's delivery from the beginning.

Momtaza Mehri worked on the project as one of the placements in her role as Young Poet Laureate for London. Her involvement was coordinated by Spread the Word. One of the poets, Antosh Wojcik, wrote a new poem about the Barbican to share with the groups he worked with. He shared the poem and his experience of the project with us for a blog post to celebrate National Writing Day on 26 June 2019: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/blog/magic-poetry-and-out-classroom/>

Findings

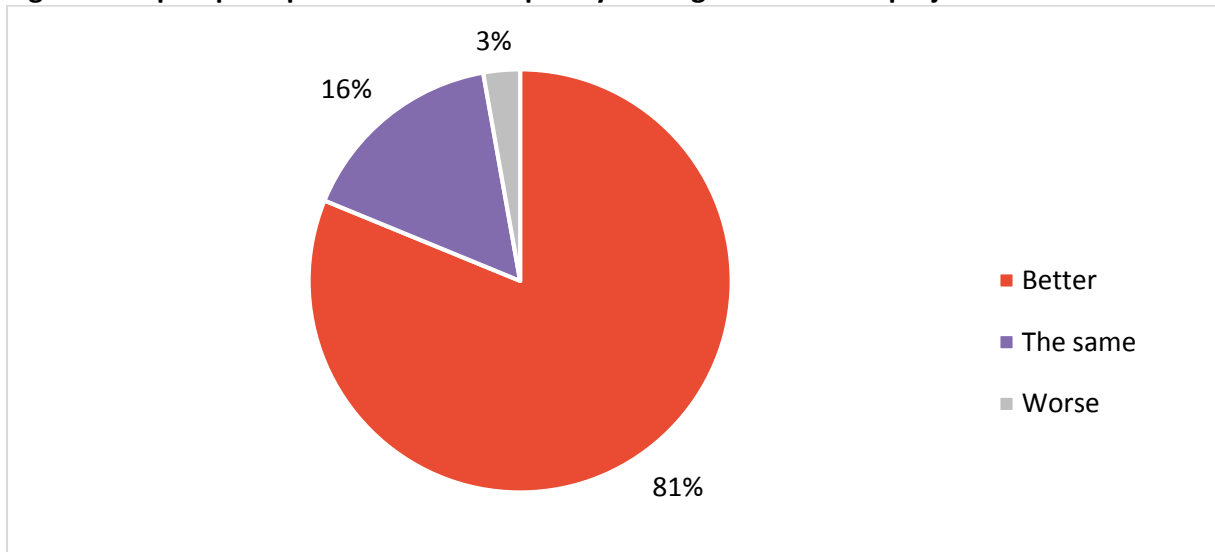
We had data from 252 pupils who completed a reflective post survey (see Appendix 1 for an overview of the evaluation methodology). We had an even gender split, with 46% of boys and 44% of girls taking part (the remaining 10% didn't want to identify their gender). We also had responses from 29% of pupils who said that they receive free school meals, our proxy measure of socioeconomic background. This percentage is higher than the average across London (11%), indicating that our project successfully engaged those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

These pupil voices were complemented by 17 teachers who gave us their feedback on the programme, as well as their perceived impact of Young City Poets on their students.

Key finding 1: Students are better at writing poetry and have more positive attitudes to it as a result of taking part in Young City Poets

We asked students to tell us how good they think they are at writing poetry now that they have taken part in the programme. As Figure 3 shows, 4 in 5 (81%) students told us that they are now better at writing poetry as a result of taking part in Young City Poets.

Figure 3: Pupils' perception of their own poetry writing skill after the project



We also asked the students whether they had learnt any new words as a result of the visit to a cultural venue that is central to the Young City Programme. As can be seen in the word cloud in Figure 4, they had learnt new words related to poetry (e.g. “haiku” and “ode”), various periods of history (e.g. “plague” and “air-raid”) and the venues themselves (e.g. “bascules” for Tower Bridge, “almshouse” for the Charterhouse) amongst other things.

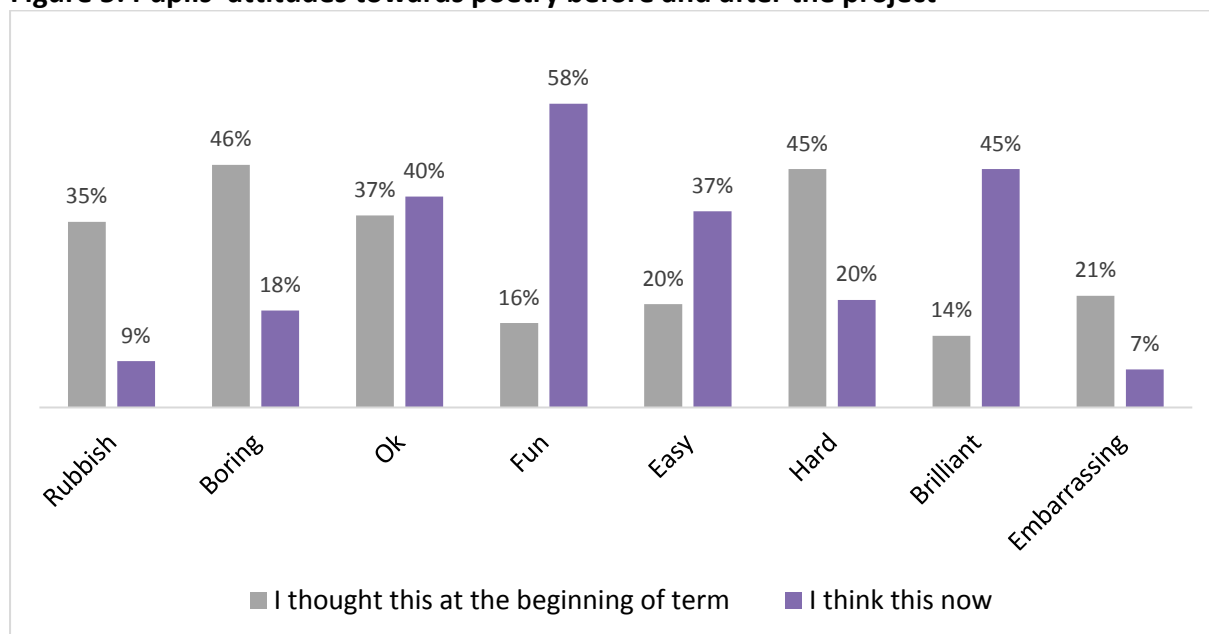
Figure 4: Word cloud of new words learnt as part of the Young City Poet visit to a cultural venue



Not only do students feel that they are better at writing poetry and have expanded their vocabulary, they also told us that they have changed their attitudes to poetry, particularly their enjoyment of poetry and their confidence and motivation to write it.

Almost three times as many pupils think poetry is brilliant or fun at the end of the project compared to those that did before (see Figure 5). Conversely, students were almost four times less likely to think poetry is rubbish (35% before compared to 9% after). Students were also more likely to think poetry was easy (20% of students before the project and 37% after) and less likely to think poetry was hard (45% before, declining to 20% after).

Figure 5: Pupils' attitudes towards poetry before and after the project



These findings are also corroborated by the teachers' post reflective surveys. Of the 17 teachers who completed the survey, 15 told us that the programme increased the students' writing enjoyment, whilst 12 told us that it had an impact on writing confidence (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Teachers' observations on the project impact

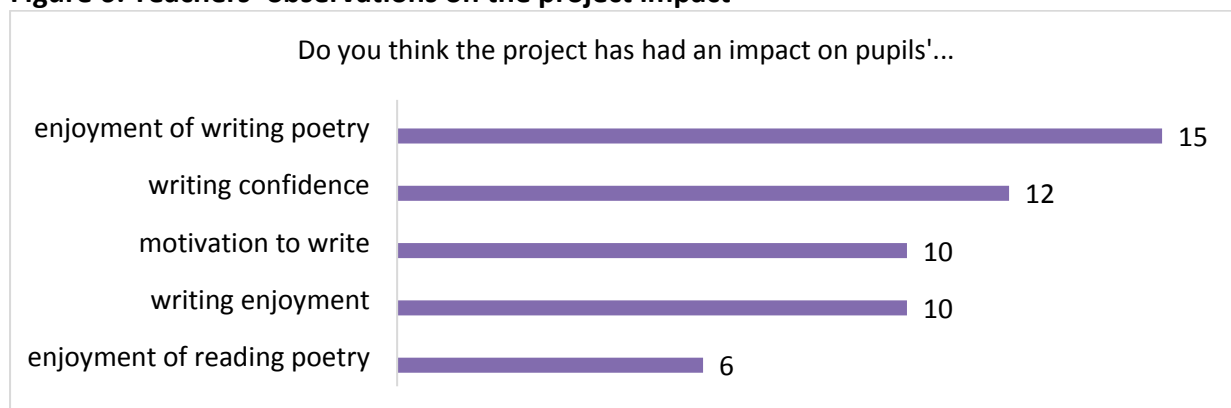


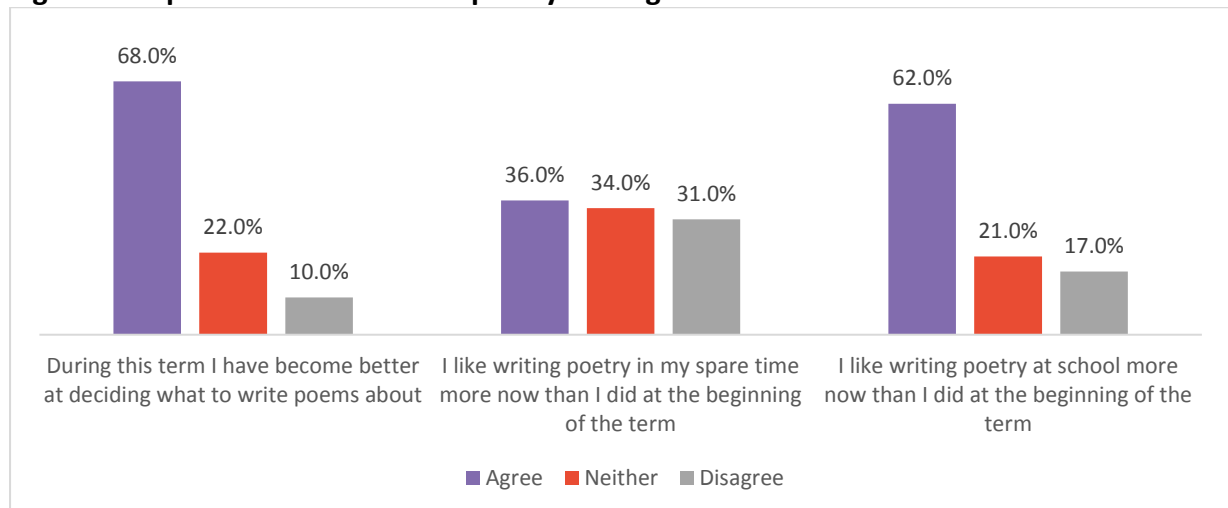
Figure 7 presents more data to corroborate the fact that the programme has had a substantial impact on pupils' enjoyment and confidence. Pupils also told us that they are like writing poetry at school more. 68% agree or strongly agree with the statement that they have become better at deciding what to write poems about. 62% agree or strongly agree that they enjoy writing poetry at school more. Over 1 in 3 (36%) also agreed or strongly agreed that they now like to write poetry in their spare time. Our open-ended survey questions that invited pupils to share their own thoughts also highlighted their interest in writing poetry in their free time. For example:

“I tried writing haikus at home about the blitz.”

“I made my own poems at home.”

“I wrote a poem about the ring.”

Figure 7: Pupils' attitudes towards poetry writing



We also asked students to tell us how writing poetry might differ from the other types of writing they do. Here is what some of them told us:

“Poems are a form of art which are amazing.”

“Poems are more like a song.”

“I believe with poetry, the words are meant to flow as if it were nothing and provoke a more emotive response from the reader/audience.”

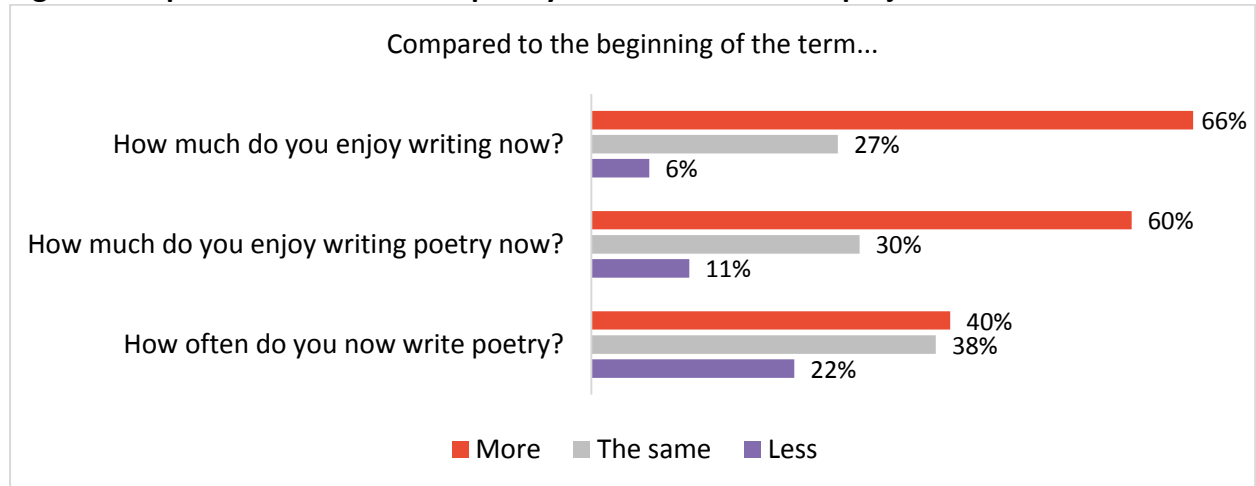
“Poems to me express feelings and is like talking to someone even if you are not.”

“Because poetry doesn't have rules for punctuation and there is less holding me back. I that you can do more with poetry and be more free/creative with it.”

Key finding 2: Students have improved attitudes towards writing in general as a result of taking part in Young City Poets

In addition to the impact on pupils' enjoyment of poetry and how often they write it, the project has had a broader impact on enjoyment of writing more generally. Figure 8 shows that almost 3 in 5 students say that they enjoy writing poetry more and that **2 in 3 now enjoy writing more compared to the beginning of the term.**

Figure 8: Pupils' attitudes towards poetry before and after the project



Key finding 3: Students are more creative and show some improvements in critical thinking as a result of taking part in Young City Poets

The project also had a positive impact on the students' critical thinking and creativity. Studies have demonstrated that memorable experiences enable children to find inspiration for writing and unlock their creative potential⁸.

Figure 9 shows that 3 in 4 students (74%) agreed with the statement that taking part in this project has helped them come up with good ideas for their writing. Moreover, the programme has engaged students to think critically by inviting them to consider different points of view. This is shown by the fact that **2 in 3 students (66%) agree with the statement that this project has helped them "think about things from different points of view"**. Lastly, 58% agree with the statement that Young City Poets has enabled them to express their thoughts and opinions.

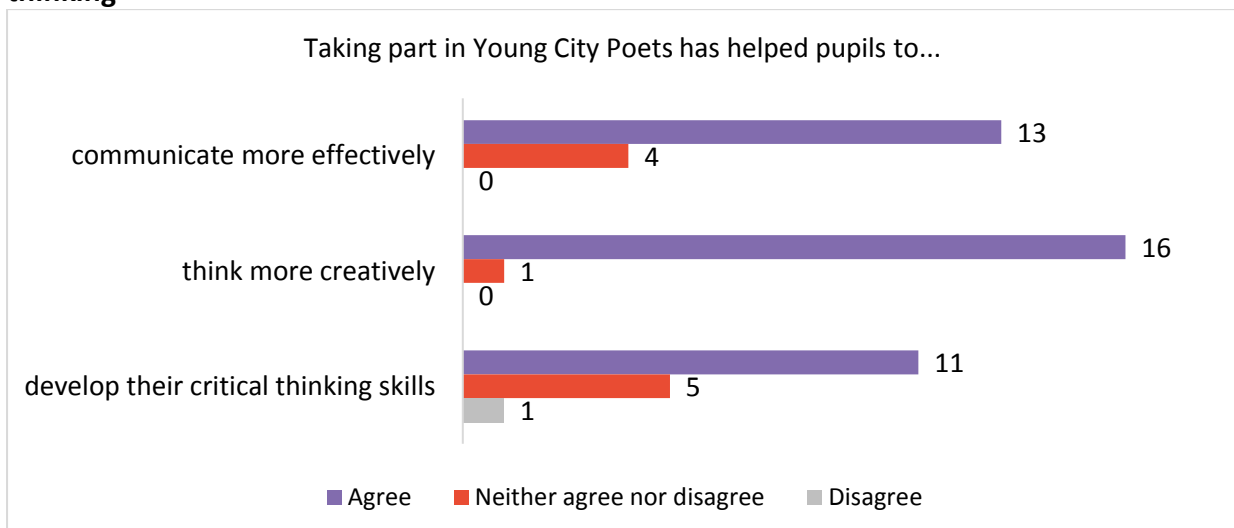
⁸ EEF (2014)

Figure 9: Pupils' attitudes towards poetry before and after the project



The findings were also corroborated by the teachers' perspectives (see Figure 10). Of the 17 teachers surveyed, 13 told us that they agreed the project helped their pupils communicate more effectively. Almost all (**16 of 17**) told us that the project has helped their students think more creatively. Finally, 11 of the 17 agreed that Young City Poets has helped their students to be more critical.

Figure 10: Teachers' perceptions of the impact of Young City Poets on creativity and critical thinking



Key finding 4: The visit to the cultural venue was a valuable experience for students

For students, the inspirational starting point of the Young City Poets project is a visit to a memorable place. After the visit we asked students to tell us about their visit, and the responses suggest that the visits were valuable experiences for the children.

In total, 32 schools (19 secondary schools, one secondary SEN group and 12 primary schools) and 877 students experienced cultural visits as a result of the project. The students were aged 9 to 13 years old and had generally been selected by their teachers because they demonstrated reluctance towards writing or their attainment in writing was lower than expected. The resources developed with each cultural venue were pitched to ensure their relevance to both end of Key Stage 2 and early Key Stage 3 students, broadening the relevance of the cultural venue and expanding the project's reach.

National Literacy Trust target schools always have a higher than average proportion of pupils receiving free school meals. Anecdotally, several of the teachers highlighted that their students were unlikely to access London's cultural offering, especially those based in outer London boroughs. We asked teachers to comment on the impact of the visit on their students. One teacher wrote one of the most valuable aspects of the projects was

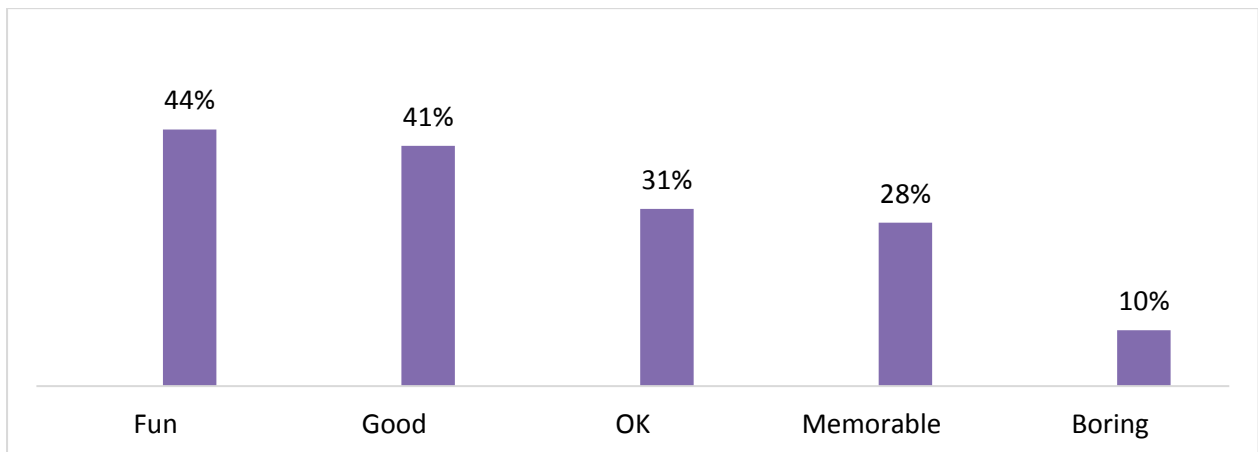
“Access to cultural experiences which many students lack. More able students in particular were very engaged and took creative risks in their writing.”

Firstly, it was encouraging to find that the vast majority of the children ticked positive adjectives to describe the visit. As seen in Figure 11, **44% of students described it as “fun”**, whilst 41% described it as “good”. The most interesting questions in the survey were not the closed questions but the open-ended ones. Almost 1 in 4 students wanted to describe the visit as “something else” and several of these (12 students) wrote it was “interesting”. 126 students added additional voluntary comment about the visit, expressing how much of a fascinating experience it was for them. Comments included:

“I found it interesting and it inspired my love for poetry and I discover I am very good at poetry.”

“I found out a lot more about London than I could have ever known. I am really surprised about all of the things I learnt.”

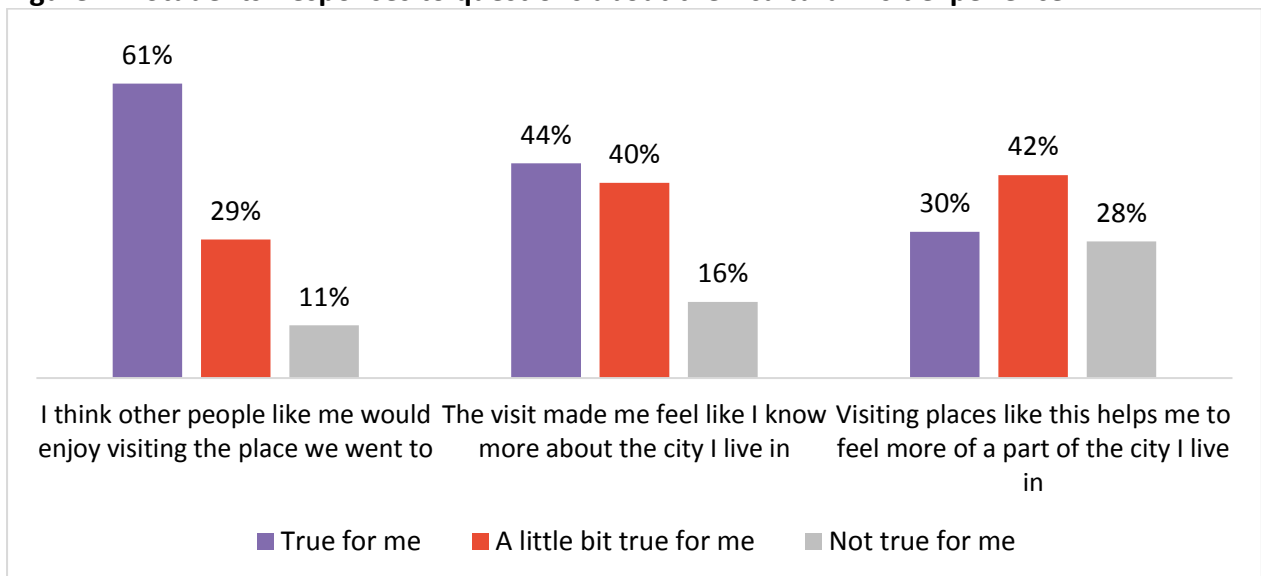
Figure 11: Adjectives used by students to describe their visit to a cultural place



Half (50%) of all children told us that they spoke to their friends and family about the visit. We hope that as a result, the students may return to the same or other cultural venues with their family.

The visit also strengthened their sense of place and belonging. As can be seen in Figure 12, almost 90% of students agree that “people like them would enjoy visiting the place they went to”, while 84% said that the visit made them want to know more about the city they live in. 3 in 10 told us that visiting places like this makes them feel part of their city, with almost three-quarters of young people agreeing that this was at least a little bit true.

Figure 12: Students’ responses to questions about their cultural visit experience



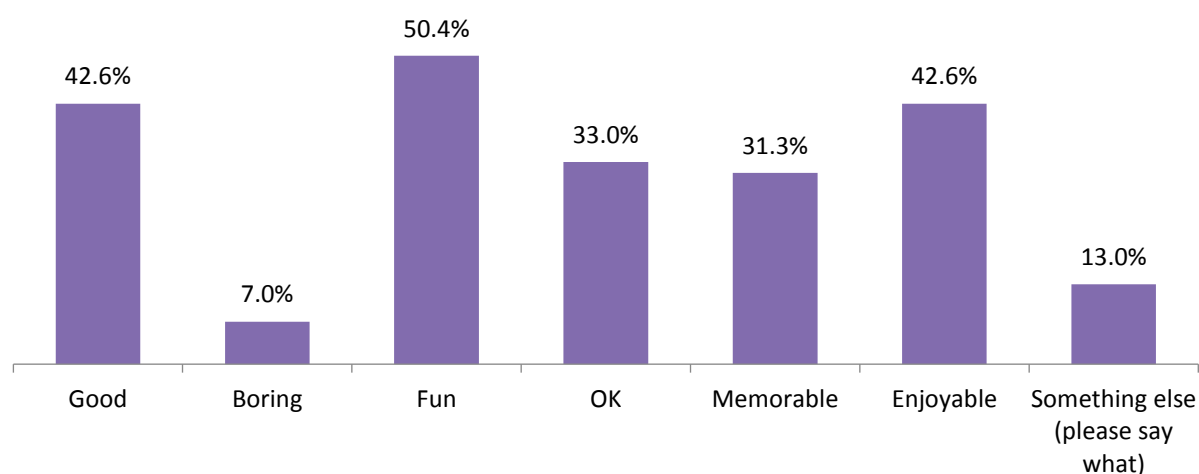
All teachers believed that the visit was a valuable experience, with 11 of the 17 teachers surveyed describing the visit “very valuable” and six describing it as “quite valuable”. Several of the teachers fed back that the experience was valuable because the students did not typically access experiences at cultural and heritage venues. For example:

“The visit gave the girls a chance to engage in a local space that they don't know much about. The visit also introduced the students to a whole new side of British history that they were not aware of.”

Key finding 5: The workshop with a professional poet had a positive impact

The students responded very positively to meeting and working with a poet, with most of them describing the poetry workshop as “good” or “fun”, as shown in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Students’ perceptions of the poet visit experience



The qualitative comments from students on the experience were very insightful. The two main themes that emerged were confidence and enjoyment. Several of the students said the poet visit made them more comfortable to write and perform their own poetry. For instance, students told us:

“It made me more confident at performing my poem.”

“The visit was helpful as Laila Sumpton gave us lots of tips on performance”.

There were also numerous comments from students telling us the visit was a very enjoyable experience for them. For example:

“I absolutely loved meeting the poet because we had an awesome time with him.”

Recommendations for the future

The main thing that teachers said would have made the project even better was having more time to deliver it. We are confident that the project does not adversely impact teacher workload as it is aligned with the national curriculum for English in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. However, we would like to increase the available delivery time from one term to one and a half terms so that teachers are able to embed the visit, workshop and lessons into their planning effectively.

One teacher suggested that more support from colleagues across the curriculum would have been useful to boost students' confidence. We are aware of some schools where this has happened which we can share in future as an example of best practice.

A member of a staff at a cultural venue suggested that building stronger relationships with schools directly would have strengthened the impact of the visit. We would like to work with cultural venues to explore the best ways of working for the future.

One of the poets noted that there are few opportunities for poets to share best practice on workshop delivery and to build their own professional network and this is something else we would like to explore.

Conclusion

From this report it is evident that the project was very successful in achieving its objectives. Delivery was successful, with 35 teachers participating in training, and 877 pupils having the opportunity to write a poem based on a school visit, work with a professional poet to refine their work, and then publish and/or perform it. The project was delivered to the target population, since the cohort had a substantially higher average of students eligible for free school meals in comparison to the London average.

The project was particularly effective in delivering the expected outcomes for students, made clear by the students' responses which were supported by the teacher surveys. The responses paint a clear picture that the students were effectively engaged with poetry. The proportion of students who actively disliked poetry substantially decreased and poetry enthusiasts tripled.

The project was also effective in engaging students with writing more widely. In addition, the project was effective at unlocking students' creative potential, and to some extent their critical thinking. Students fed back that they found it easier to find things to write about and were more capable of thinking about things from different perspectives. The students enjoyed their cultural visit and working with a professional poet.

Appendix

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation strategy for Young City Poets attempts to capture both the perceptions of teachers and the self-reported attitudinal shifts in students. Teachers were asked to complete a training feedback form after their initial training, and were asked to reflect on the programme as a whole at the end of the project.

Students were asked to complete a post-programme questionnaire which explored their changes in attitude, confidence, and allowed them to feed back on their memorable experience and on the poet visit.

Evaluation tool	What was it measuring
Teacher training feedback	The impact of the training on the way teachers approach writing and poetry in the classroom
Teacher post- programme survey	The impact of the programme from teachers' perspectives
Students post-programme survey	The self-reported impact of the programme on students

Rationale behind evaluation methodology

Pre and post self-report measures are widely used in evaluation research to measure the impact and outcomes of a programme or intervention. This means that students who take part in a programme or intervention are asked to complete self-report surveys at the beginning and end of the programme to help evidence change in outcomes over time.

To evaluate Young City poets we chose to remove the pre-survey and administered a post-intervention reflective survey instead. There were two main reasons for this decision:

1. Increased validity

Using a comparison of a pupil's pre-intervention scores with their post-intervention scores can be problematic due to a confounding factor known as "response shift bias". Response shift bias refers to a pupil's understanding of a concept changing between the pre-test and post-test as a result of the programme. For example, pupils who took part in a programme might understand reading enjoyment differently at the end of the programme than they did before, which would make it difficult to compare their responses over time.

Instead, a reflective post-survey design means that a single instrument (e.g. survey) is used to measure both pre and post responses. This means that while participants will be asked questions only at the end of the programme, they are asked to reflect on how they felt, and what they thought, before the programme. For example, we use questions such as, "How much do you enjoy reading?" followed by, "Thinking back to the beginning of the project, how much did you enjoy reading?".

Using this method reduces the possibility of this bias, ensuring that pupils' knowledge and beliefs are consistent when assessing their pre and post programme knowledge, skills and

attitudes. Such reflective post-tests have also been found to match more closely with expert judgement of participant knowledge and skills compared to pre-survey ratings.

2. Better use of project resources:

On a practical note, the post-intervention reflective survey requires only one survey point, lessening teacher workload and potentially increasing response rates, and therefore the reliability of results. In addition, we will no longer lose valuable data due to attrition between the pre and post survey points. In the past, this has been an issue for some of our evaluations where teachers didn't survey or test the same pupils at the beginning and end, or pupils didn't enter the "matching variable" correctly, which meant that significantly fewer of the surveys could be matched.

Student sample

The project was successful in gathering data from almost all students partaking in the project. Table 1 outlines the demographic profile of the students. Almost 3 in 10 (29%) students told us that they were entitled to free school meals. This is above the average for the city of London, which in 2018 was 11%.⁹ Therefore, students who were taking part in the project were more likely to come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Table A1: Sample demographic

Total respondents	250
Boys	46%
Girls	44%
Other	10%
Free school meals	29%

⁹ Department for Education (2018), Mayor of London Data. Students Eligible for Free School Meals.