

Young City Poets

YEAR 2 PROJECT REPORT

Introduction

Over the last five years, the National Literacy Trust has been trialling and developing a writing programme which supports the most disadvantaged children to enjoy and improve their writing. In 2016/17 we were generously supported by MAN Charitable Trust and Historic Royal Palaces to work with some of the most renowned cultural venues in London to improve children's writing.

We would like to extend our thanks to all our cultural partners who provided memorable and inspiring experiences for all the children involved:

Barbican Centre

Keats House

London Metropolitan Archive

Museum of London

The City Centre

The Monument

Tower of London

Thanks also to the schools involved for participating in the project and especially to the coordinating teachers:

Arts & Media School Islington; Bacon's College; Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School; Chingford Academy Trust; City of London Academy (Southwark); Cobourg Primary School; Dagenham Park Church of England School; Derwentwater Primary School; Eastbury Community School; Harris Academy Purley; Harris Academy South Norwood; Hathaway Academy; Holmleigh Primary School; Lilian Baylis Technology School; Little Ilford School; Manorfield Primary School; Prendergast Ladywell School; Robert Clack School; Rushcroft Academy Trust; Sir Thomas Abney School; Southmead Primary School; Springwell Junior School; St Andrew's (Barnsbury) CE Primary School; St Andrew's CE Primary School; Stamford Hill Primary School; Stockley Academy; The South Norwood Academy; Twickenham Academy; Willowfield Humanities College; Wix Primary School

And to the poets who delivered fantastic poetry workshops for all the children and young people:

Jasmine Cooray, Becci Fearnley, Caleb Femi, Miriam Nash, Laila Sumpton and Antosh Wojcik.

Background

Why poetry?

Poetry is inherent in all forms of writing – words, ideas and communication are at its heart. Concentration on poetry benefits writing in all other areas of the curriculum. Teaching poetry is not so much about showing pupils how to be ‘good at’ poetry, but encouraging them towards a curiosity about poems and how they work, a willingness to play with language and a desire to communicate ideas and discover and define their individual poetry style. The process of lively discussion, followed by collaborative and individual writing and performing tasks, enables pupils to engage with literacy on their own terms in a way that also meets national curriculum requirements.

Perhaps surprisingly, young people receiving free school meals are significantly more likely than their more affluent peers to read and write their own poetry outside school. We believe this is because poetry is an ideal medium for self-expression. As writer Jeanette Winterson put it: “A tough life needs a tough language”.

Providing 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, 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 sites and, worryingly, DCMS recently reported a 3.1% decline in school visits to the cultural venues they sponsor. However, an EEF-sponsored efficacy trial found that writing approaches which use a memorable experience as the inspiration for writing helped the children to achieve an additional nine months progress over the course of a year.

Our experience of delivering Young City Poets builds on this research and demonstrates the positive benefits for children and young people of immersion in a creative process, including a cultural visit and the opportunity to explore poetry with a professional poet.



Project delivery

Cultural partners

In 2015, the project was successfully piloted with four cultural venues based in the City of London: the Barbican Centre, London Metropolitan Archives, Museum of London and Tower Bridge. This year we have added an additional three cultural venues funded by Man Group Plc Charitable Trust – Keats House, The City Centre and The Monument – as well as starting work with Tower of London who had seen the fantastic work done in year one of the project and who sourced their own investment in order to secure their involvement in the project.

The National Literacy Trust worked in partnership with the venues to refresh or create poetry workshop resources based on an inspiring collection item, which was selected by the cultural venue. Based on

feedback from the pilot which suggested that it might not be sustainable to invite poets to deliver school workshops in each venue, we supported staff members from the cultural venues to deliver the workshops themselves. Feedback from the cultural partners involved in the project this year has been overwhelmingly positive:

“It was great to be involved in a brilliantly structured project that focused solely on poetry as the literacy strand. Bringing a new audience to us through the National Literacy Trust has been invaluable. We thoroughly enjoyed being involved and having an opportunity to involve other departments in our school programme has done wonders for gaining in 'buy-in' from colleagues.”

Teacher CPD

A training day was held at the Museum of London on 14 October 2016 and was attended by 25 teachers, librarians and intervention specialists from participating schools, as well as representatives from each of the seven cultural venues. All participants who were not able to make the training day were visited later in the term for a twilight briefing by the National Literacy Trust Project Manager.

Similarly to the pilot, this day outlined the project and provided participants with practical suggestions for using cultural visits to inspire young people's poetry. It also provided the cultural venues and the members of school staff with the opportunity to meet each other, discuss priorities and begin to plan their visits. Teacher feedback from the CPD day included:

“Excellent strategies and approaches into teaching poetry. Thank you!”



School visits



In total, 30 schools (18 secondary schools and 12 primary schools) and 900 students experienced cultural visits as a result of the project, doubling the projects expected reach. Of these, 25 visited the venues in the City of London and five visited the Tower of London. 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. We found that when we promoted the project offer to our member schools secondary schools were very keen to take up the offer in addition to the primary schools we had expected to target. 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 projects reach.

National Literacy Trust target schools always have a higher than average proportion of pupils receiving free school meals and lower than average attainment. Anecdotally, several of the teachers highlighted that their students were unlikely to access London's cultural offer, especially those based in outer London boroughs:

“Great idea to use stimulus in our city that our students don't actually access as 'locals'.”

The young people enjoyed their visits enormously, with **98%** of the young people responding positively about their experience of the visit. Feedback from a primary school pupil about their visit to the Monument:

“We went up a lot of steps and it was very tiring but it was worth it. After we got up to the top we saw the astonishing view of the city.”

Poets

We worked with six London-based poets: Jasmine Cooray, Becci Fearnley, Caleb Femi, Miriam Nash, Laila Sumpton and Antosh Wojcik. Caleb Femi is currently the Young People's Laureate for London and worked with two of the venues as one of his residencies. He also created a [new poem](#) based on his experience working with students during their visit to The City Centre.



Jasmine worked with school groups at the Barbican Centre, using the building as inspiration to gather ideas for poems while the other poets visited the schools later on in the term to support the students in developing their poetry. They were given flexibility to structure their own sessions and all of them introduced different creative activities, for example, Laila asked the pupils who had visited the Monument to personify the Great Fire of London as an animal in order to create extended metaphors.

The students responded very positively about the experience of meeting and working with a poet, with most of them describing the poetry workshop as “good fun” or “very good fun”. Feedback from a teacher who visited the London Metropolitan Archives and worked with Antosh Wojcik:

“Both the session at the archives and also the poetry visit here have been some of the best delivered outside education provision that I’ve ever been involved with.”

Poems produced by students

Untitled

Smoke will conquer all
No shelter for survival
England will be lost
Severe damage caused from above
Major destructions they are

Structural defence
Contaminated wasteland
Will England come back?
No future just history
September 1940

He cried no one heard
Left in a state of darkness
Future disappeared
Debris, rubbish and rubble.
Damage is beyond repair

Year 8, Little Ilford School

THE FIRE



QUEEN

Standing proudly

She studies the land before her preparing for destruction

She leaps onto her first victim and devours it ravenously

Triumphantly she roars loudly



Like a cunning fox she pounces without warning

She rips and crashes and smashes to ashes

All the buildings that stand in her path as the public scatter erratically

She sees her aim

The tower of London

She smirks with power

As she plots to cause pain

She starts to run run run

This gargantuan fire spreading



Towards the east its journey

Finally thinking my work is done

She victoriously starts to walk back smelling of burnt wood

She walks through cinder playing and laughing

She has demolished the city smiling and joking

Emptiness lies where the city stood

People soon thought is this land cursed

Or is it just God being so angry with us

No it's the devil doing his work

She's so happy with herself her heart will burst

She's now leaping down the road

Her wings ready, ready to flow

Back down to the burning hot hell her master awaits

To give his apprentice more assignments

Before she goes she flies into the air

Then roars out fire

Creating substantial flames falling down to earth

She left the city in total despair

By Deborah Yr6



Evaluation

“I learnt that I like going to museums.”

For over **three-quarters** of the children and young people who responded to the survey, this was the first time they had visited the cultural venue, suggesting that the project supported the cultural venues to access new audiences.

A positive learning experience for students

In reporting their experience of the school visit, several of the young people mentioned that they had learned something new about London or had a new experience:

“(I learned) that if the Monument fell over it would reach the baker’s shop on Pudding Lane where the fire started. There is a less famous statue close by called the golden boy to show where the fire was put out.”

“I really enjoyed going to the Tower of London because it was my first time going there and it was fun to see some of the Tower of London’s landmarks.”

We asked the young people what they had learnt during the visit:

- **48%** of respondents explained something about the venue or a collection item
- **38%** described something about poetry
- **7%** explained something about the venue or collection item **and** poetry

“Keats used to be a doctor and they didn’t have painkillers so they had to hold you if you had to cut off your leg.”

“That poetry isn’t the use of words and techniques but of how you use them to bring to life your poem. Art can inspire you to write as well as structures.”



Students and teachers reported that the cultural visit and the poet workshop were very enjoyable. **95%** of teachers reported that their students enjoy writing poetry more as a result of the project and **80%** had noticed an improvement in the young people’s motivation to write. This is a particularly notable finding given the link between enjoyment of writing and attainment.

“Students really surprised me with how engaged they were with Caleb, in particular, some hard to reach students asked how they themselves could become a writer and what he used as inspiration.”

“(I learned) about how fun poetry can be and how you can express emotions by performing poetry.”

“I felt the project brought writing to life. My children would not have been able or as interested in writing sonnets if we hadn't been involved.”

Some teachers also commented on the positive impact of the project on pastoral aspects of their role, including pupil behaviour and attitudes to learning:

“The whole project has had a greater impact than I expected. It improved my relationship with students who I didn't teach. It improved student behaviour and allowed them to fully immerse themselves in a cultural experience with purpose.”

“I chose a very tricky year group to work with and very tricky students were chosen to go on the trip. It made me realise that the students who are the most challenging behaviourally are the ones I need to target because the impact is so much greater.”



100% of teachers stated that they would use school visits differently in the future, and that they would consider working with cultural venues to promote literacy again in the future.

“I have been asked to organise a literacy day for a sixth form group later in the year and I will almost certainly be running it in a cultural venue following my experience with YCP.”

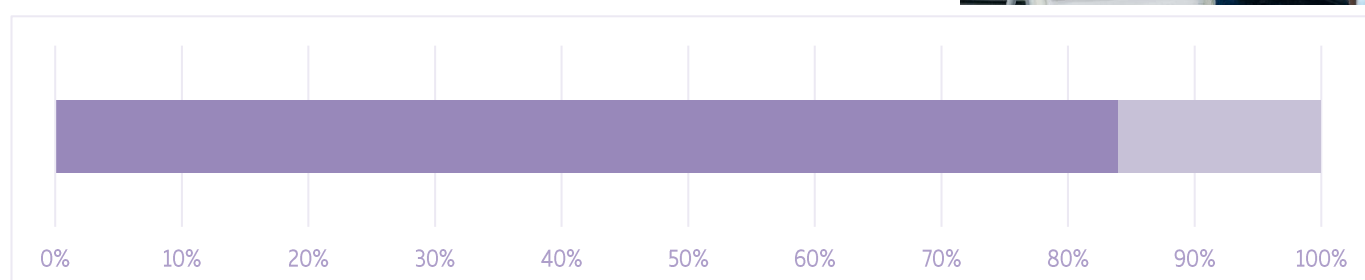


Improved quality of writing

Both students and teachers explained the value of the project, particularly the poet workshops, for improving students' understanding of the writing process.

"I learnt that you should keep your rubbish poems because you can use some good ideas to make another poem better."

"Having a real purpose for writing made the practice credible for students who often find it difficult to write from perspective, character or different angles."



84% of teachers reported that their students' writing skills were better as a result of the project.



"The children were given clear ways to improve their own poems and all made fantastic progress."

"Invaluable. The children became immersed in Shakespeare's London. This meant their further work on this topic has been rich and full of detail."

Improved attitudes to writing

"I love writing more! I like writing more now because, it's kind of inspired me."

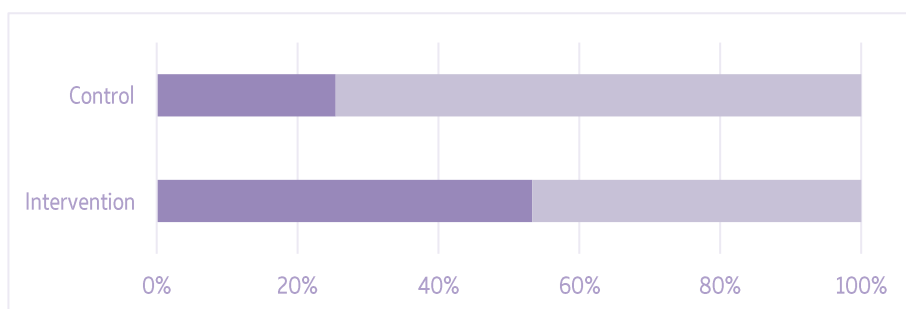
Reported attitudes to poetry were much better in the intervention group than the control, with students who participated in the project being:

- More than **twice as likely** to say "poetry is fun" and "poetry is brilliant"
- More than **three times as likely** to say "poetry is easy"
- **Three times less likely** to say "poetry is boring"

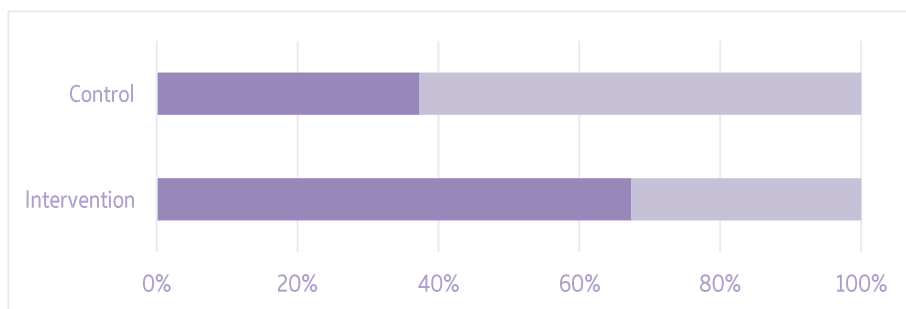
In such a short timeframe it would have been optimistic to expect behaviour change, however the survey highlighted an interesting difference between the responses of the intervention and control group secondary school students. For the intervention group, the amount they reported writing outside of school remained the same, however there was a significant decrease in the writing frequency of the control group over that period.

Similarly, while the intrinsic motivation to write remained steady in the intervention group, it collapsed in the control group over the same time period. The figures illustrated below compare the intervention and control groups at the end of the project.

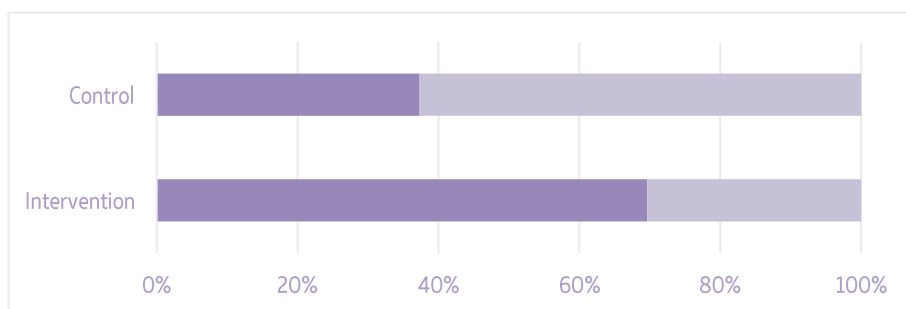
“Writing is cool”



“I like writing at school”



“Writing is fun”



It should also be noted that the majority of children and young people did not consider ‘poetry’ to be the same thing as ‘writing’. These findings are very interesting and demand further research and exploration.

“Whatever the teacher has told you for writing, you have to do it. But poetry... you can do what you want.”

Summary

Feedback from participating pupils, teachers and cultural partners has been overwhelmingly positive and we are hopeful of being able to replicate the enormous success of this project across the UK.

The evaluation has also highlighted several areas of interest in relation to children and young people's writing which would benefit from further research. In particular, the way pupils perceive writing poetry to be a creative process rather than being linked to the functional process of writing, and the sharp decline in writing enjoyment experienced by the control group pupils over a two month period.



Feedback from a cultural partner:

“We have increased our knowledge and skills around developing and delivering poetry-focused workshops at our site, and have broadened our horizons as to what aspects of our site can be used as such a stimulus. Whilst they hadn't visited our site, the teachers who attended the evaluation session very strongly indicated that they highly valued learning outside the classroom experiences as a means of supporting the delivery of the literacy curriculum and aiding pupils' engagement.”

Feedback from a teacher:

“Loved it, accessible and interesting for the children. All involved were very knowledgeable, and it was lovely to do something with a class outside of school that promoted literacy.”

Feedback from a secondary school student:

“Many people enjoyed it, many people they said, before we went to the Barbican that they didn't really like English. They thought it was boring. But then when they entered the Barbican Centre, they changed their thoughts, because they found out English can be so fun and adventurous, and it changes their opinions.”



Feedback from a primary school pupil:

“I think I enjoy poetry more after the trip to the Monument because, like before, I was planning what it would look like and how I would write it out, but after actually being on the top of it and seeing everything, you can see how you can describe it, how you can say how everything looked... And after the um... the meeting with the poet, like, she gave me words.”

Commissioned poem inspired by The City Centre visit

And So You Forgot What This City Said To You As A Child

A blade of muttering bounces
on the shoulder of skyscrapers
- I know you heard it too.

Every year I add to my age
I hear it less and less
maybe this is how magic works.

I envy the soft bone in your ear
they remain pristine and hear
the engines torquing about things

I have no privilege to know anymore.
You have always been good at
keeping secrets, so good.

Tell me, when the wind rubs its back
on the metal and glass of these buildings
does it still sound like my old uncle yawning?

What I would give to be a child again
in the hush of the rush and hear once more
the secrets of this place made of glass and salt.

By Caleb Femi, Young Laureate for London

