

# Write on!

The Ministry of Stories project has a positive impact on children's creativity through writing, explains *Professor Dominic Wyse*

**C**reativity is one of humanity's most prized assets. We revere the most creative people and celebrate their achievements with international prizes and recognition. We recognise the importance of creativity in our everyday lives, for example using our imagination to make things or solve problems. In the workplace, it is prized by many employers. Nevertheless, it fails to feature strongly in early years and primary education as part of national curricula, and its place in education appears to be far from certain.

A discussion about creativity in education nearly always includes questions such as how we might define creativity and whether it can be taught. Here, I define creativity as 'a person's ability to create something that is regarded by appropriately qualified people as new [/original] and of value' (Jones and Wyse, 2013).

Defining something as creative is a social judgement. In the case of high levels of creativity, this social judgement includes the prizes and accolades that I alluded to earlier. In the case of more everyday creativity, this judgement is made by people who are appropriately qualified.

Such qualifications require relatively specialised knowledge appropriate to the context of the creativity being evaluated. So, in the case of children's creativity, teachers are well placed to make such judgements,



particularly when done in collaboration with a colleague. Teachers are able to use their knowledge of child development, and of the individual child, to reflect on the extent to which something a child has created is new.

The judgements about originality also require a judgement about value. For example, is the creativity of value to the child themselves, to their peers, to their parents, to their community?

## HIGHLY REGARDED

Historically, creativity in UK early years settings and primary schools has been highly regarded by other countries. Ideas such as play-based learning and child-centred philosophies have been influential, and the encouragement to actively create things as part of teaching and learning: for example, composition in writing, music and visual art forms.

**The MoS is based in Hoxton, London, which has areas of deprivation alongside areas of affluence**



In relation to writing and creativity, notable examples in England include the ideas of the charismatic local education authority leader Alec Clegg, who wrote *The Excitement of Writing* (1964). Like Clegg's approach, the process approach to writing of the 1980s also encouraged children's creativity through the choices it gave them (Wyse, 1998).

Creativity and writing have also resulted in the engagement of professional writers with children. For example, the poet Ted Hughes wrote about such things in *Poetry in the Making* (1967). And at a national level, the Creative Partnerships initiative in England brought together schools and people with professional engagement with creativity.

The topics of defining creativity, teaching creativity, creativity in writing and creative partnerships have been brought to the fore recently by the Ministry of Stories (MoS).

## DYNAMIC MIX

Inspired by the US writing centres led by author Dave Eggers, the MoS was founded in 2010 by author Nick Hornby, Lucy MacNab and Ben Payne in an attempt to replicate, in the UK, Eggers' original San Francisco-based centre, 826 Valencia.

The MoS is based in Hoxton, which, like many areas in London, has significant levels of deprivation mixed with pockets of affluence, a situation that creates a dynamic mix of families from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. The MoS building is fronted by Hoxton Street Monster Supplies, which on today's web ads was offering: Salt made from tears of sorrow; Your Story Starts Here (a notebook with advice on writing by children); Zombie Fresh Mints; Cubed Earwax; Milk Tooth Chocolate; and a range of Tinned Fear (stories in tins), including Escalating Panic and The Heebie-Jeebies.

## IN THEIR OPINION: SCHOOL VERSUS MoS PEDAGOGY

### Perry

In school we do like we are supposed to do like two and a half pages but in the Ministry of Stories you can do how many pages you want, and they don't force you to, and in school they do really force you.

### Elizabeth

And at school they force

us to write, like... well not really forcing... yeah, forcing, because they are not allowed to write for us, and if we are like feeling sick they don't want to hear what we say, they just want to know what they say, and they give us something to write about. But in the Ministry of Stories they don't really give us something

to write about, we can write about what we want.

### Edith

Main difference is... say zero [out of 10], but I'll say five because it actually helps you, school writing, but I think it's really boring in class, just missing that funniness that Ministry of Stories has.



## MORE INFORMATION

- Clegg, AB (1964). *The Excitement of Writing*, Chatto and Windus
- Hughes, T (1967). *Poetry in the Making*, Faber and Faber.
- Jones, R and Wyse, D (Eds) (2013). *Creativity in the Primary Curriculum*, Routledge.
- Wyse, D (1998). *Primary Writing*, Open University Press.
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## FUTURE VISION

We have adapted the music requirements in the national curriculum 2014 to represent a proposal, and new vision, for English in the national curriculum in future

**Purposes** One of the highest forms of creativity; increase [pupils'] self-confidence, creativity and sense of achievement

**Aims** To create and compose writing on their own and with others; to understand and explore how writing is created

**KS1 programme of study**  
Experiment with, create, select and combine words using the interrelated dimensions of language

**KS2 programme of study**  
Improvise and compose texts for a range of purposes using the interrelated dimensions of language; listen with attention to detail and recall text with increasing aural memory

Behind Monster Supplies is the writing workshop. This includes the mysterious room where The Chief, who is never seen but is occasionally heard on the Tannoy, works. The design replicates to some extent a kind of World War 2 bunker, along with background music of the period, giving a real nostalgic feel.

The MoS aims to have a positive impact on the creativity, motivation for writing and writing development of young people from economically deprived backgrounds. Young people voluntarily attend the MoS centre, where they engage in a range of writing workshops supported by a full-time leader and volunteer mentors. As well as regular drop-in sessions for young people three times a week, the MoS does a wide variety of bespoke work, including ongoing or self-contained projects with schools.

One of its high-profile projects, called *Share More Air*, was a collaboration with Communion Records. The children wrote the lyrics, which were then worked on by professional musicians to produce an album that is on sale through Amazon and iTunes.

Inspiration came from Hornby's *Lonely Avenue* album, for which he wrote the lyrics and Ben Folds wrote the music. One of the children's emotional reaction to hearing their song for the first time is shown on the promotional video for the project, as is Folds singing one of the songs with backing from, among others, comedian Matt Lucas.

## EVALUATION

In 2012 a team from the UCL Institute of Education was contracted to carry out a three-year research evaluation of the work of the MoS. A new research instrument was developed. This required the research associate on the team and the MoS workshop leader to discuss and agree the level of creativity demonstrated in samples of writing of each of 15 children who

had been randomly selected from the MoS cohort as case studies.

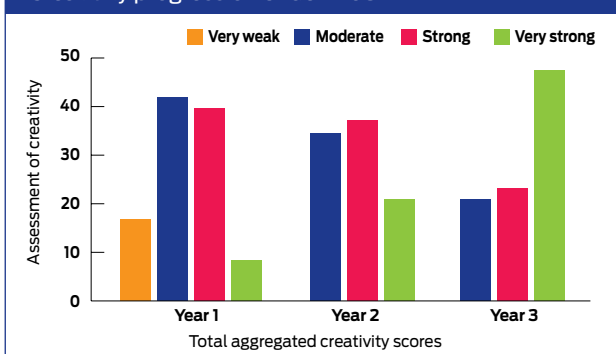
The process of consensual judgement was carried out for each of the three years of the research. The criteria for judging the writing were the extent that the writing showed: imaginative adaptation; originality; and value. For the project's analyses, these judgements were aggregated as whole numbers (see graph).

There was evidence overall, taking account of the creativity assessments, the case studies of children and of bespoke MoS projects, and from interviews and observations, that the MoS and its approach to creative writing had made a strong positive contribution to the children's creativity.

A key development was the children's transition from strong reliance on, and imaginative adaptation of, familiar sources (including print- and screen-based stimuli such as books and games) towards more confidence to create their own ideas for writing.

The research data included interviews with the children carried out at the start of the project and each year of their involvement in the MoS. One of the many interesting things that the children spoke about was why they valued the MoS approach so much more than their school's, where they felt forced to write as opposed to being encouraged to write through

Creativity progression under MoS



creativity. Their involvement in MoS made them more perceptive of the pros and cons of school-based writing pedagogy (see box).

One explanation for this can be seen in England's national curriculum requirements, in particular its undue emphasis on grammar compared with its relative lack of emphasis on creativity. We have good evidence from research and professional practice to show how creative writing can be encouraged.

If as a society we value creativity, then this should be evident in a coherent and robust way in our national curricula (for more information on how the UK compares with other countries in Europe, see Wyse & Ferrari, 2014). And as a starting point for a new vision of England's curriculum, perhaps we need national requirements for writing that are more like those for music (see box). ■

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