

Paul Hamlyn
Foundation

Teacher Development Fund

Embedding learning through the
arts in the primary curriculum

Part of an independent evaluation of the pilot
programme 2016–18 by the Centre for the
Use of Research and Evidence in Education

Case study

Heathfield Primary School,
Art of Learning

Location: South Ayrshire, Scotland

**Project developed by Creative Scotland; Creativity,
Culture & Education; and Education Scotland**

This study focuses on the role of school leaders in using
arts-based approaches to teaching and learning to extend
and enhance the curriculum, to develop pupils' executive
function and to encourage creativity and collaboration.



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Introduction

Improving people's education and learning through the arts is central to the Teacher Development Fund.

This Fund aims to enable teachers and school leaders to develop their skills, knowledge and experience in order to embed learning through the arts in the primary curriculum. The Teacher Development Fund (TDF) was initially developed as a two-year pilot programme running from September 2016 to July 2018.

From May to August 2018, the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) carried out case studies of four individual schools participating in the TDF pilot as part of its evaluation of this programme:

- Burry Port Community Primary School/Ysgol Gynradd Gymunedol Porth Tywyn, Listening to Language/Cerdd Iaith (Burry Port, Wales)
- Heathfield Primary School, Art of Learning (South Ayrshire, Scotland)
- Hotspur Primary School, Concordia (Newcastle, England)
- St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School, Full Steam Ahead (Ballycastle, Northern Ireland)

The purpose of engaging in the process was to support future projects to understand what successful embedding learning through the arts in the curriculum looks like in individual schools, and to give texture to what this 'embedding' means and some of the different ways of going about that.

This case study focuses on the role of school leaders in using Art of Learning based strategies to extend and enhance the curriculum, to develop pupils' executive function and to encourage creativity and collaboration.

Heathfield Primary School – Art of Learning

School background and context

Heathfield Primary School has 525 children, aged 4 to 11, on roll. It has a low proportion of children experiencing disadvantage relative to Scottish averages.¹ The school performance has been good for a number of years, confirmed by a 2017 HMI inspection, which concluded the school has gone from strength to strength in recent years.

Overview of the Teacher Development Fund project

For the last two years, Heathfield Primary has participated in the Art of Learning, a pilot project for Paul Hamlyn Foundation's TDF facilitated by a partnership between Education Scotland; Creative Scotland; Creativity, Culture & Education; East, South and North Ayrshire local authorities; and CEDETI, a research centre in the Pontifical University of Chile in Santiago. The Art of Learning focused on helping teachers embed a range of arts-based practices that allowed pupils to develop their creativity skills, executive function (for example, inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility) and close the attainment gap through increased engagement and by breaking down barriers for learners experiencing disadvantage. The Art of Learning project aimed to give children at least one hour of high-functioning learning through the arts per day, for four days per week, over the ten-week period.

The project aligned closely with Heathfield's commitment to engaging children with a rich curriculum that provides opportunities for them to take risks and fulfil their potential, and prepares them for life. It also connected to the school's desire to foster a creative approach to teaching. For example, the school proactively decided to involve two newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in the project, reflecting its belief that the project was fundamental to its aspirational model of teaching. The priority was to equip the NQTs from the outset with this way of thinking and give them the space to experiment and adopt a creative approach to teaching as a way of harnessing their ideas, skills and enthusiasm.

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education/Datasets/contactdetails>

Case study: Heathfield Primary School

In this case study, we describe the professional learning environment in the school, the school's approach to teaching and learning through the arts, and the way arts-based learning is being embedded in the school and beyond. Evidence informing this case study was gathered through:

- a focus group of teachers with different levels of involvement with the project
- an interview and informal conversations with the school's lead teacher
- a focus group with P4 and P5 children
- inspection of documents, displays and art work associated with the project
- a summary of children's favourite moments and words associated with the project, collected by the visiting artist in a final visit as part of the Art of Learning project
- surveys and reflection tool responses from the overall pilot project evaluation

Professional learning environment

Teachers as professional learners in learning through the arts

Throughout the project, teachers have taken responsibility for their own professional development in learning through the arts. They have treated reflection, experimentation in the classroom and collaborative planning as the key sites for development, rather than thinking about training as something delivered in a staff meeting or a workshop. The school is starting to see this approach as a model for professional learning across the school more generally.

The opportunities for experimenting and improvising have given teachers the confidence to do things differently and to be honest with pupils about trying new things and going on a journey with them. A genuine trust in teachers' professionalism gave them the autonomy and ownership of the changes to teaching and learning that are required for greater creativity and flexibility. The pupils who we spoke to wanted their teachers to be a bit more creative with their lessons and told us that they were seeing this.

Teachers' capacity and confidence to experiment with new techniques and to take on the Art of Learning approach was strongly supported by the structured lesson plans that formed part of the project. Although in some cases the plans initially limited the scope for teacher experimentation, as the teachers grew in confidence the lesson plans became a cornucopia of ideas rather than a prescription. As the school's lead teacher said: "I read one session plan now and see a multitude of opportunities from that one session's plan. And I think that's how [the teachers] feel as well. They followed them quite strictly to start with and gradually became more fluid in the way they approached the use of them. They really valued the support of them to start with."

Collaboration, reflection and peer support

Teachers have adopted a collaborative and reflective approach to professional learning. There were numerous opportunities for reflection during the project, such as questionnaires and enquiry tools, and the planning meetings with the Art of Learning artist practitioners. These helped teachers reflect, individually and collectively, on how practice was changing and the value of learning through the arts. The collaborative approach to planning and reflection supported and developed existing school practices. There were also some areas where coaching and mentoring, in particular with the NQTs, was a vehicle for reflection and collaborative learning.

The teachers' reflections focused on how pupils were learning through the arts and how best to break down barriers to learning. In some cases, this developed the skills and confidence of pupils in particular art forms. In some cases, creative expression and enriching the curriculum was the main focus.

“I think making time for meaningful reflection is really important in this project. Carving out half an hour to discuss the sessions with teachers was crucial – what worked, what didn't, how we might edit things. It allowed teachers to build confidence and to stand back and see the benefit of the project for both the children and themselves, without them feeling that it was taking up their teaching time.”

Teacher learning log

Use of specialist arts expertise

The school was able to draw on the expertise of the artist practitioners, watching them model new approaches and techniques and, in particular, through co-planning sessions. The planning sessions combined the expertise encapsulated in the project session plans, the school's own curriculum plans, and the teachers' and artist practitioners' ideas. The work with the artist practitioners struck a good balance between inviting challenge and drawing on expertise and retaining teacher ownership of the planning process. As one teacher reflected: “I feel having the artist practitioner there to support but taking responsibility for the implementation in my class has allowed my confidence to grow.” Collaborative work with the artist practitioner influenced teachers' thinking too. The lead teacher explained that the importance of the artist practitioner's role lies in their ability to ask different questions and enabling teachers to look at things differently. For teachers, their classroom is their “little world – which is a wonderful thing”, but “sometimes we need to be shaken up a bit and to think differently”.

Teaching and learning through the arts

Teaching and learning approaches and strategies to learning through the arts

Through their participation in the Art of Learning project, teaching and learning through the arts has been characterised by using arts-based approaches to enhance pupil creativity and risk-taking. It also enhances the engagement and achievement of learners experiencing disadvantage in core subjects and the curriculum more generally. In the project, the role of art in teaching and learning has operated as something to be drawn on as “a way of helping us learn” and in the development of creativity, thinking and problem-solving skills, rather than art being targeted as a feature in its own right. As the lead teacher explained, “a lot of art is not creative” and “a lot of creativity is not art”. One teacher reflected that: “I didn’t teach the children how to dance at a high level. They had to use dance to explore something through a different lens, a different perspective.”

Teachers found that the approach taught them to incorporate different art forms, creative strategies and teaching styles into their lessons, leading to rich learning experiences. They also discussed how the approach aligned well with Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence through its focus on interdisciplinary learning. Teachers described how they were incorporating different art forms into the teaching of a range of lessons and interdisciplinary topics. Examples include the use of dance, music and drama to learn about the weather in Scotland and India, the life cycle of the salmon and the Roman Empire.

“I used freeze frames and a sequence of movements during drama to express how we thought the Romans and the Celts would feel going into battle, and I used dance to allow the pupils to come up with a routine for marching into battle, along with the four beats lesson of music to help them keep time and rhythm when they were performing as a whole class.”

Teacher focus group

For the more experienced teachers, the new approach rekindled a flexibility and creativity in their teaching. This way of planning and teaching is now “at their fingertips” and a key part of the way they do things in the school. They are, as one teacher described: “Adapting sessions to everyday teaching in an effortless way. Doing away with rigid planning systems and time-keeping strategies and applying a strategy to a simple lesson element.” The NQTs, despite the challenges of the NQT year, have also taken the teaching and learning approach into their repertoire.

Teachers reported how a more creative approach helped learners to take ownership of their own learning and express themselves. In our focus groups and in end of project feedback, pupils described it as a fun, engaging approach to learning, where they could make choices and shape their lessons. They reported enjoying a wide range of activities, including composing and performing raps, enacting a Roman war, filming using iPads and self-evaluation using the programme evaluation ‘learning trees’. Teachers and pupils also agreed that through building a whole-class, collaborative ethos, the Art of Learning approach was supporting the development of socio-emotional skills. In a reflection session, pupils described how the session incorporated activities related to ‘team building’, ‘self-control’ and ‘listening’. Teachers reported being confident that now this mindset was in place, pupils would transfer it to other areas.

Strategies for overcoming barriers to learning

Teachers recognise the value of arts-based learning and the Art of Learning approach in breaking down barriers to learning, speaking at length with us about the disadvantages faced by individual pupils and groups of pupils in their classes, ranging from specific learning needs to issues stemming from home, and the implications of these. While feeling that socio-economic status was sometimes a poor indicator of disadvantage, their focus is predominantly on lack of engagement, confidence and resilience caused by special educational needs, social or emotional difficulties or poor communication skills. Teachers identify ways that they have been able to help these pupils to develop their confidence and step outside their comfort zone through the opportunities offered by the Art of Learning approach for working in small groups and pupils taking the lead in their own learning.

Leading and embedding learning through the arts

School vision and values

Creativity is a high priority in Scotland through the Curriculum for Excellence and is widely recognised in school improvement and accountability systems. At Heathfield, some teachers regard creativity as a core characteristic of their teaching, while others view it as something that enriches their practice. There is a healthy tension between innovation and consistency of practice across the school, particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy. One of the roles of the lead teacher has been to secure understanding of and support for the approach from teachers and leaders in the school, as well as external authorities in order to sustain momentum in the face of competing initiatives. Two years in, the teachers involved are confident that the Art of Learning approach is 'rooted' in their classrooms and their practice, and they are confident of the continuing benefits.

“There are children at the side lines but before you know it, they are joining in, and even taking a lead role. That’s been lovely to see. It has pushed others out of their comfort zone.”

Teacher focus group

The Art of Learning approach also strongly aligns with the school’s commitment to “building trust at all levels”. This encompasses:

- **Trust at a leadership level:** The lead teacher reflected on how in the relatively large leadership team, all leaders were able to work well together in recognising each other’s strengths. Her own role in taking the lead on the project was as a result of the head teacher recognising her strengths as a creative thinker, who would invest in the project as a way of “freeing people to do things differently”.
- **Trusting in teachers:** The lead teacher commented how in her own monitoring of other teachers’ progress in the project, particularly for the non-NQTs, she was keen for this to be an informal process of observation and discussion.
- **Trusting in the pupils:** A central tenet of the Art of Learning approach is to trust pupils to shape how lessons unfold and direct their learning.

“What I am particularly interested in is being able to build a curriculum based on the uniqueness of our school, where its progression is built on relevance – creativity becomes an implicit part of our context and ethos, thus improving learning outcomes for children.”

School leader learning log

Linked to the school’s vision to build trust at all levels was the key role of the lead teacher in embedding the approach, in particular in relation to the extensive support she provided for the NQTs. Describing her own personal interest in the arts as strong, she felt that she was now aiming to give embedding learning through the arts greater priority than at the beginning of the project and leading it more effectively for the school: “The personal impact of the project has been enormous. It has helped me to think more creatively in all areas of my work.”

Embedding learning through the arts in the curriculum

By the end of the second year of the project, teachers felt that their model of embedding learning through the arts had become “a significant component of school practice” and were reporting using arts-based techniques or activities in their day-to-day classroom practice on a weekly basis (and in some cases more frequently) in core subjects as well as topic areas. In particular, teachers identified the potential of the Art of Learning in supporting learning in literacy, including using drama to help pupils to learn about character and explore and express their reactions to texts, and embedding warm-ups and reflections as lesson starters across the curriculum. The Art of Learning session plans provided by the projects were felt to have played a crucial role in this. This is particularly evident in the second year, when teachers were developing the confidence to adapt the resources for different topics, and exploring where the connections could be made, and which topics were more or less prescriptive.

Pupils were viewed as being as much a part of the embedding process as the teachers. Participating teachers have described how pupils who participated in the first year brought their learning with them into the second year and continued to develop it. Pupils too reflected on how the Art of Learning approach was starting to become a normal part of their lessons, with one pupil describing some of the sessions as “secret” – that is, a seamless part of the curriculum rather than an isolated or noticeable activity.

Systems for monitoring and evaluating impact of learning through the arts

The school is committed to continuing to monitor the impact of the Art of Learning approach in relation to its social and emotional benefits, and the effect on the school ethos and academic achievements. Measuring the impact of the approach for pupils in receipt of Pupil Equity Funding is a particular priority. The school is planning to use part of its funding for the next academic year to continue having an artist practitioner it worked with through the project come into the school on a weekly basis.

It plans to use the digital testing for executive function as one concrete measure of pupil outcomes (although executive function itself will not be an ongoing focus), in addition to literacy and numeracy attainment data. The school is equally keen not to lose sight of the outcomes that are more difficult to capture and measure, such as confidence, engagement, social skills and creativity, and to continue to work towards a rich vision of what it wants for its pupils.

Making connections

Throughout the TDF project, the school has built strong professional partnerships with the artist practitioners they have worked with, one of whom will continue to work with the school weekly over the next academic year, which it regards as important for maintaining an ongoing link to artistic expertise.

A key focus for the school, during the project and in moving forwards, has been engaging parents in their children's learning and making connections between pupils' home and school lives. One way the school achieved this was to create a display board at parents' evening to showcase what the children had been doing as part of Art of Learning, and inviting a number of children to speak informally to parents about this. Art of Learning has also featured in pupils' written reports to parents at the end of the year as an "outstandingly positive" feature and in the school's termly newsletter. Looking ahead, next year the school is planning to introduce a children's blog around creativity and learning to maintain the connection with their lives outside of school.

How the project supported NQTs is another important aspect of the wider strategic connections the school is making. Following on from her role in supporting NQTs through the project, the lead teacher will be leading on the professional development of NQTs from across the South Ayrshire region, and is already reflecting on how to help a wider cohort of new teachers take up "the freedom to be creative", "permission to experiment", and to pursue initiatives during their first years of teaching.

Where next?

The school is confident that it is already starting to see the lasting impact of the project taking shape, including in the development of teachers' and pupils' creativity skills and collaboration, and the development of a common language around creativity. It is looking now to strengthen and build on this in various ways, including:

- featuring Art of Learning in the School Improvement Plan
- continuing to work with one artist practitioner in particular, and using the Art of Learning session plans to provide a starting structure for collaboratively developing the approach
- broadening the reach of learning through the arts through mobilising teachers and pupils who have already been involved – for example, by allocating the teachers who have already been trained to different year groups and using the school's collaborative approach to planning within the stages (which teachers describe as "cooperative at every level") to cascade their learning to new classes of children and to their year group partners. This will be particularly important for highlighting to new teachers where there are opportunities for the pre-existing session plans and resources to be adapted for other topics – for example, exploring the links to health and wellbeing and literacy – or for the needs of particular learners.

Case study: Heathfield Primary School

The participating teachers, led by the lead teacher, also aim over the next year to embed learning about Art of Learning as part of their wider school CPDL planning. This is being designed to imitate the running of the Art of Learning programme itself, beginning with a more structured approach, sharing their learning at an INSET day in August, and moving towards more participatory learning through staff meetings. Art of Learning teachers will take on the role of expert coaches while working alongside the class teachers and continuing to develop their own practice and embedding. They plan to hold a review after eight weeks to reflect on where teachers might need more structure and where they are “ready to fly”.

With their greater understanding and increasing ownership of what it means to embed learning through the arts, the school is now focusing on developing a common language about what creative learning encompasses. It will use the ‘five creative habits of mind’ (developed by Creativity, Culture & Education and the Centre for Real World Education) as a starting point, as it feels this is better suited because it includes collaboration in creativity. The school will then continue to build on this and develop its own common language for pupils and staff.

Once this is in place, the school plans to start feeding the Art of Learning approach into other school systems, such as formal observations. At the same time, it will be careful not to make the language too prescriptive and to leave room for ongoing creativity and innovation. This will be driven by the school’s solid vision for support, trust, collaboration and creativity between teachers, school leaders and pupils at all levels and in all their interactions. Colleagues involved in the Art of Learning project felt that the project’s creative approach to learning was now something they had ownership of and was embedded in the curriculum and their ethos. They hope that the new school year brings an opportunity to further spread the approach to teaching, learning and professional development across the whole school.

“I want people to step into Heathfield and to see creativity, to feel it. I want them to hear it. I want it to be tangible. I know that’s a challenge, but it’s also so exciting.”

Lead teacher interview

Further reading

Case study: Burry Port Community Primary School/Ysgol Gynradd Gymunedol Porth Tywyn, Listening to Language/Cerdd Iaith (Burry Port, Wales)

This study examines how the TDF has enabled a middle leader and colleagues to study and create a rich blend of music, language, technology, maths and more. The full case study is at phf.org.uk/TDF/BurryPort.

Case study: Hotspur Primary School, Concordia (Newcastle, England)

This study examines the way a school can connect the arts and each pupil's emotional development and wellbeing to develop confidence and resilience, and to enable highly differentiated choices about how to engage pupils experiencing disadvantage with the arts in response to individual needs. The full case study is at phf.org.uk/TDF/Hotspur.

Case study: St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School, Full Steam Ahead (Ballycastle, Northern Ireland)

This study explores how teachers acquired a sophisticated understanding of the technical aspects of film (as consumers and creators) and translated this understanding to pupils. It also looks at how this approach enabled pupils experiencing disadvantage to engage with film in a deep, critical fashion and become ambitious to push forward their own creative uses of film in multiple ways. The full case study is at phf.org.uk/TDF/StPatricksStBrigids.

Teacher Development Fund: Year one pilot evaluation

Read the report: phf.org.uk/TDF/YearOnePilotEvaluation.

Teacher Development Fund pilot programme 2016-18 evaluation

Read the report: phf.org.uk/TDF/PilotProgrammeEvaluation.

Learn more about the Fund at phf.org.uk/funds/tdf.

For details on application deadlines, contact ela@phf.org.uk.

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