

update



Leading Learning through
Action-led Research and Innovation

THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE LAUREL TRUST

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Welcome to the Winter 2025 edition of Update

The Trustees send their good wishes for the festive season. Our new raft of projects are now under way and we recognize the commitment of all those involved in developing a better future for your children. By the time you receive this Newsletter these projects will all have received your first visit by our Consultant Director and an attached Trustee, an experience we always hope will be of mutual benefit. We trust that you manage to have a very enjoyable break from all your professional activities.

**Bill Goddard, Chair of Trustees
The Laurel Trust**

IN THIS ISSUE – 2 Creative Connections | 6 Project to Practice | 10 MetaSENse

Creative Connections

Empowering young people through learning and community



Emily Reid is Creativity Lead at Holy Family Multi Academy Trust in Wirral and alongside key leaders across the trust spearheaded a project that transformed the educational experiences for its underserved/disadvantaged students.

In this article she talks about the transformative work the trust is undertaking to provide opportunities for both staff and students to thrive.

Tackling disadvantage through creativity and collaboration

Young people from underserved/disadvantaged backgrounds often feel they have little control over their futures. Many face challenges such as low school attendance, poor mental health, and reduced access to learning opportunities. Within the Holy Family Catholic Multi Academy Trust (HFCMAT)

on the Wirral, these issues are particularly significant with over a third of students eligible for Pupil Premium. As a trust we sought to address these challenges and led a groundbreaking project, Creative Connections, exploring how learning competencies, authentic audiences, and community partnerships can transform education for young people.

Our research began with one guiding question- ***"How does a focus on learning competencies and local partnerships impact the education experience of***

young people from underserved/disadvantaged backgrounds?"

We believed that if we could connect our students' learning to the real world, to people, places, and possibilities in their own communities, we could reignite that spark of curiosity and confidence.

The Creative Connections project involved seven schools, sixty teachers, and more than twelve hundred students. Our schools had already been working to develop learning competencies based around the Centre for Real World Learning 5 dimensional model-



habits for creative thinking. It provides an excellent model to support the development of young people across the creative skills of collaboration, inquisitiveness, persistence, imagination and discipline. At HFCMAT we refer to them as habits for learning and life. Alongside this, community relationships have consistently been fundamental to our mission, and this project provided the opportunity to strengthen these strategic partnerships to enhance the quality of educational opportunities we provided. There was a need to foster a deeper connection between pupils and the real world. By emphasising purpose, quality, and real-world relevance, we believed this approach would not only motivate pupils but also prepare them for life beyond the classroom.

The project set out to:

- Strengthen teachers' professional development through creative pedagogy
- Design a curriculum offering real-world relevance and opportunities to share learning beyond the classroom.
- Build community partnerships that connect schools, families, and local organisations.

There were two strands to the project. First was the professional development of teachers in relation to learning competencies and authentic audience (Ron Berger) and the other the creation of exciting educational experiences in collaboration with community partners.

Professional development of teachers

Together we created a community of practice, which provided time and space for teachers to engage in new learning and reflect on their current classroom practice.

We provided:

- Training on the use of authentic audience and how to run cycles of inquiry
- Planning time for teachers to develop curriculum plans
- Training and resources to deepen the understanding of learning competencies based on the 5 creative habits model
- Half termly networking meetings to share good practice
- Online platform to share outcomes from the project.



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Educational experiences

Throughout the project, we used existing and new partnerships to create rich and impactful experiences that extended beyond traditional classroom walls, fostering a closer connection between pupils and their community. A place based approach allowed us to break down barriers and create a greater sense of belonging and connection to the community for our students. Working with key partners such as Chester Zoo and Theatre Porto we were able to significantly enhance the opportunities for our students beyond the curriculum.

These opportunities included students taking part in a Chester Zoo Takeover Day, entering the Dot Art Schools competition, presenting at HFCMAT COP29 (a sustainability event that showcased their creativity and environmental awareness), exhibiting their work in a Sustainable Art Exhibition, participating in a local initiative Weapons Down, Gloves Up and so much more. But perhaps the highlight of the project was the week-long arts festival in New Brighton. Students from across the Trust performed spoken word, stand-up comedy, theatre, and music, and sang in community choirs during a vibrant street festival. It was a celebration of creativity, courage, and belonging.

"I was so proud of myself and feel like I'm capable of achieving better things now. Performing in my local area made me feel like I was really at home. The people made a real difference to my confidence."

Student



Impact for all

From the beginning, we wanted this project to be something our pupils could feel, see, and be part of. We built in opportunities across the curriculum for authentic audiences, giving students the chance to create work for people beyond their teachers. Whether it was performing poetry, curating art exhibitions, taking over Chester Zoo for a day, or running community events, our pupils suddenly had real audiences, real

feedback, and real pride in what they were learning. We saw an increase in a sense of belonging and pride from having their work shared with their families and a wider audience. One of my favourite moments was watching a normally shy student perform her own poem at the arts festival. Afterwards, she said, "I felt good because everyone listened, and I thought- did I just do that?" She wasn't just learning; she was believing in herself. Teachers

saw students' work improve, not because the teachers demanded it, but because students cared more deeply about what they were creating. They wanted it to be good because it meant something. Eighty percent of teachers reported seeing a rise in the quality of student work, and saw more confidence, pride, and joy in their classrooms. As one teacher said after a pupil-led Holocaust event covered by Granada TV.

"The kids were just phenomenal. Their questions were deep, thoughtful, and full of humanity."

Teacher

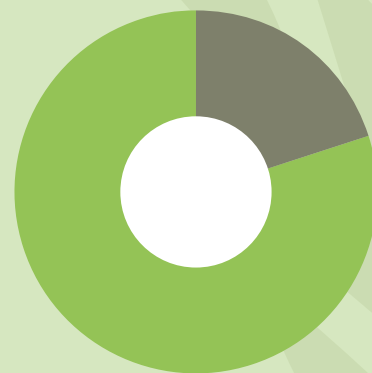


"It's been amazing to bring everyone together around a collective mission that fits strongly with our Trust's strategic plan."

Project Leader

For the teachers' own professional development, the transformation was just as powerful. They were active participants in a community of practice across schools, creating time and space to reflect, share, and design new learning experiences together. They explored what it means to teach through creativity and how learning competencies like collaboration, curiosity and perseverance can be woven into every subject. There was a renewed professional motivation and improved relationships with pupils. Teachers began to unlock the opportunities to bring their curriculum to life through creative pedagogies and community partnerships. They learned the power of collaboration between schools, teachers, families, and local partners, reminding us that

teaching is not a solitary act, but part of a much bigger story about community and connection.



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Legacy

We're not stopping here. When I walk through our schools, I see young people who aren't just participating—they're leading. They're more confident, more curious, and more connected. I see teachers who feel inspired again.

We are developing toolkits and sharing our approach with other schools so they can replicate the success of Creative

Connections. We're building new partnerships, refining our curriculum, and continuing to place creativity, connection and compassion at the heart of what we do. HFCMAT's Creative Connections project demonstrates how creativity, community, and compassion can transform education, building not just skills for school, but confidence and creative habits for life. This journey has taught us that

creative learning is not an optional extra— it's essential. When we give pupils authentic reasons to learn, they show us what they're truly capable of. When we give teachers time to collaborate and experiment, professional energy comes flooding back. And when schools open their doors to the community, something remarkable happens: a sense of shared ownership, hope, and pride begins to grow. ●



From Project to Practice:

embedding storytelling for lasting impact



Rachel Hodgson is the research and development lead at Exceed Learning Partnership in Doncaster.

Following the success of our 2024–2025 Laurel Trust research project, *Opening Doors to Creativity: enhancing pupil development through storytelling*, we are delighted to share how the initial findings have become a catalyst for profound and sustainable change across our eight primary academies.

The original project, which focused on Year 4 pupils, demonstrated the transformative power of a story- and drama-based pedagogy on social and emotional development. Since its conclusion, our focus has shifted from research to strategic, trust-wide implementation, ensuring that the benefits of this creative approach reach every child.

Sharing and scaling the approach

Our first step in sustaining the work was to share the project's incredible outcomes with the

wider community. A presentation at the Doncaster Leadership Event sparked significant interest, and a trust-wide Inset day followed. Over 140 colleagues participated in a range of immersive storytelling sessions led by artists and teachers from the project.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Academies consistently highlighted the approach's power...

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Academies consistently highlighted the approach's power to increase pupil engagement and confidence. Key benefits noted by staff included: *continues over*

140
participating colleagues



• **Inclusivity and Accessibility**

The method removes barriers as it does not rely solely on writing ability, making it highly effective for children with SEND or EAL needs.

• **Deeper Learning and Retention**

Teachers felt the approach brings topics to life and helps knowledge become "sticky," supporting the retention and recall of factual information.

• **Skills Development**

The strategies were praised for

fostering creativity, collaboration, oracy, and communication. Pupils were applying their knowledge and understanding to events or dilemmas presented to them.

• **Personal Development**

Many noted the power of the approach to develop empathy and give children a sense of ownership over their learning.

Building Capacity: the Storytelling Experts

A cornerstone of our sustainability

plan has been the development of our 'Storytelling Experts', a dedicated group made up of the teachers who participated in the original project. This team receives termly CPD from Dr. Lisa Stephenson to develop their leadership of storytelling within their own academies. They have become vital mentors and coaches, supporting colleagues with planning and co-teaching to build staff confidence and share good practice. This expert-led



A cornerstone of our sustainability plan has been the development of our 'Storytelling Experts', a dedicated group made up of the teachers who participated in the original project.

model is central to scaling-up the **Storytelling Project for 2025–2026**, which aims to embed this pedagogy within the academy curriculum for all primary pupils.

A Graduated Approach: embedding practice with artists in residence

A significant piece of our work to embed this approach across more year groups involves a strategic partnership between visiting artists and our internal Storytelling Experts. To ensure teachers develop deep expertise and confidence, we have designed a graduated, three-term model.

- In the **first term**, visiting artists take the lead, delivering immersive storytelling sessions while teachers observe and participate. Crucially, during this phase, the artists also work closely with our designated 'Storytelling Experts', coaching them on co-planning to deepen their understanding of the pedagogy.

- Moving into the **second and third terms**, the Storytelling Experts take the helm. Having been upskilled by the artists, these internal leaders will co-deliver sessions with their colleagues and support them in planning. This shift ensures that the drive to embed the approach comes from within each academy, fostering sustainable growth and peer-to-peer professional development.

This carefully scaffolded model is designed to transition reliance from external support to internal capacity, ensuring our staff become confident, independent practitioners.

Broadening the scope and deepening expertise

Our new project continues to extend this work into new areas. A key development has been the introduction of bespoke CPD for our Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) leads. The session focused

on adapting drama worldbuilding for our youngest learners, exploring pedagogical tools like "Mantle of the Expert" and "teacher in role".

To further deepen the practice of the Storytelling Experts, three colleagues have also enrolled onto a Diploma in Creative Pedagogies course at Leeds Beckett University.

The lasting impact: voices from the classroom

While the strategic rollout demonstrates the project's scalability, the enduring impact on the original cohort of pupils is perhaps the most powerful testament to its success. Teachers' reflections highlight deep and long-lasting benefits, from academic gains to profound shifts in classroom culture.

The impact on knowledge retention is remarkable. One teacher shared:



“The retention of information is long lasting; a year and a half after the Roman session, we were doing a class mind map of everything they had learnt and the children could relay facts about the Romans without any prompting from an adult.”

Beyond academic recall, teachers report a fundamental change in the classroom environment. A teacher who was with the cohort for two years stated, *“I wholly believe that the dynamic in the classroom was a direct result of the storytelling project”*. She explained how collaborative work fostered teamwork, communication, and empathy, creating a genuine sense of community where pupils “supported and valued each other’s

contributions”. This culture of safety and confidence was vividly illustrated when the entire class volunteered for solos in a music lesson, an act the teacher described as “immensely crazy” and would have been unthinkable before the project.

The impact on personal development has been particularly transformative for vulnerable learners. A case study on a very reserved boy, ‘H’, revealed he developed the ability to self-advocate, a “massive step forward for him, in terms of his happiness but also his independence”. Another girl, ‘A’, who had struggled emotionally, learned to manage conflict in “quite an evaluative way” after exploring conflict resolution in drama sessions. The inclusive nature of the pedagogy also created new entry points for SEN learners. One teacher described how a boy who was initially unsure was given the role of ‘cameraman’, which “hooked him in.” Eventually, he became fully

involved and would count down the days until the next session.

This powerful pedagogy continues to demonstrate its value with new cohorts. A teacher of a new Year 3 class, after immersing them in a “Stone Age Boy” drama session, took them on a trip to Creswell Crags. Staff at the historical site were “really impressed” with the deep knowledge the children could easily recall about daily life in the Stone Age, a direct result of that single storytelling session.

The **Opening Doors to Creativity** project was more than a one-year study; it was the beginning of a pedagogical shift across our Trust. By building internal expertise, providing continuous professional development, and strategically expanding the programme, we are embedding a creative, inclusive, and effective approach to learning that will benefit our pupils for years to come. ●





MetaSENse

Making research-informed decisions about targeted interventions for students with special educational needs and disabilities



Jo Van Herwegen is Professor of Developmental Psychology and Education, Academic Head of Research for Psychology and Human Development at University College London.

Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have worse educational outcomes than their peers, and the gap is continuing to increase.

These students can benefit from universal best practices for teaching – high quality teaching strategies such as providing step-by-step instructions. But most require targeted interventions that include short-term, focused teaching approaches delivered in small groups or one-on-one settings.

What are targeted interventions?

Schools use many different targeted interventions, such as Lego Therapy, Colourful Semantics, and Catch-Up Literacy/ Numeracy. However, a recent study found that

67% of 138 different interventions used across 10 Welsh schools had no published research evidence to support them. Although we can assume that targeted interventions improve educational outcomes for students with SEND, it is unclear which ones make a difference, how rigorous the research is, and for which groups of children more research is needed and thus, teachers have no way of knowing which interventions work best.

Studies have assessed the impact of specific targeted interventions,

asking, for example, which interventions raise reading outcomes? Or they have focused on determining whether interventions work for specific groups, such as students with dyslexia. It is unclear whether certain interventions might improve certain educational outcomes or benefit more than one group of students with SEND. Moreover, many teachers have difficulty accessing research evidence, so they are unable to make research-informed decisions about which interventions to use with their students.

My colleagues and I wanted to make it easier for parents and educators to find effective, research-based support for students with SEND. To do this, we systematically searched and reviewed studies on targeted interventions that compared the outcomes of an intervention group to a control group or control condition. We also spoke with teachers and practitioners about what helps — and what gets in the way — when putting these interventions into practice.

This work led to the creation of MetaSENse, a free, easy-to-use online database designed to help teachers and families make better-informed decisions about which targeted interventions might work best for those with different SEND.

What impact do targeted interventions have?

We identified 467 studies that evaluated the impact on reading,

467

studies identified that evaluated the impact on reading, writing, maths, science or general attainment...

writing, maths, science, or general attainment of a targeted intervention for 4- to 25-year-old students with SEND. Examining these studies, we found that targeted interventions improved outcomes in students with SEND by 5 months, on average, relative to control-group students who did not receive the interventions.

Not all interventions are equally successful. Furthermore, the style of delivery — one-on-one versus small-group or whole-classroom — did not affect the outcome. Nor did

it matter whether the intervention was delivered by a specialist or a classroom teacher. In other words, an intervention delivered by a specialist in a one-on-one setting will not necessarily have a greater impact than an intervention delivered by a teacher in small groups in the classroom. And not all interventions produce positive educational outcomes for all groups with SEND.

Educators told us that because they have limited time to read research articles, and because they often lack access to such materials, they are not always aware of which targeted interventions are evidence-based. In order to adapt targeted interventions to their students' needs, they also need to know the key ingredients — or theory of change — of each intervention. This tells them which aspects can be changed, and which must remain the same if the intervention is to be effective.



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The MetaSENse database

We created a database of all the interventions we reviewed that are accessible to teachers and parents and that include an online manual that is available either free of charge or for a fee.

The MetaSENse database includes:

- A summary of each intervention and its goals,
- Who it is designed to help,
- What the evidence says about how well it works, and
- Links to manuals or resources (some free, others paid).

You can search by subject (e.g. maths, reading), age group, type of intervention, or specific needs such as autism or ADHD.

What is next?

The database will be updated in the years to come to reflect the latest research. However, the database currently focuses on interventions that measure academic outcomes, but we plan to add those that target behaviour, wellbeing, and social development. These areas are equally important, as many children with SEND experience anxiety, social difficulties, or self-regulation challenges that can affect learning.

We hope MetaSENse helps teachers and parents make research-informed choices about how to support children with SEND — helping to reduce the learning gap and ensure that every child has the chance to thrive at school. ●

The MetaSENse study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and conducted by researchers at UCL's Institute of Education:

Professor Jo Van Herwegen
Thomas Masterman
Dr Catherine Antalek
Professor Chloë Marshall
Professor Julie Dockrell
Dr Rebecca Gordon

The Centre for Educational Neuroscience, Birkbeck, University of London:
Professor Michael Thomas

For more information about the MetaSENse study and the full study report, please visit the website:

<http://www.educationalneuroscience.org.uk/metasense/>





Wishing you all a very happy Christmas

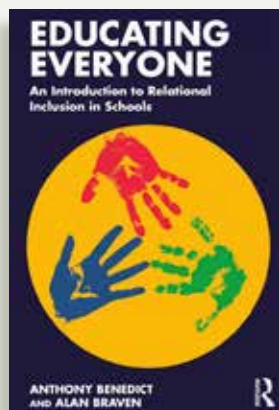
As we come to the end of another school term and another year, we would like to thank all of the schools that have welcomed us in to visit them this term. The commitment and enthusiasm is palpable, and we have been inspired by the dedication and good practice we have seen. It is a

tremendous privilege to watch the projects unfold.

As we close this issue of the update, we would also like to wish all of you a very happy and restful Christmas and new year.

Derrick Brett, Consultant Director

Finally, if your looking for Christmas presents here is a reminder of the books that we shared in the last update which arose from Laurel Trust projects...

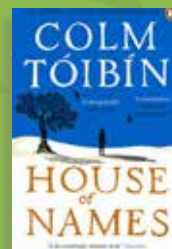


Educating Everyone
Anthony Benedict
Alan Braven

Improving Behaviour and Wellbeing in Primary Schools
Editors:
Jean Gross Sarah Seleznyov

Book Club

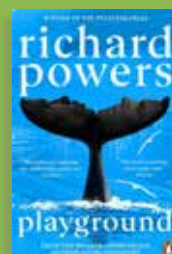
What our Trustees are reading



House of Names
by Colm Tóibín

This is a fabulous reimagining of the Oresteia trilogy which recounts events following the return of Agamemnon from the Trojan War. The author tells the story from the perspective of Agamemnon's wife and children, which only serves to amplify the horror as the human tragedy unfolds.

Stephen Albone | Trustee



Playground
by Richard Powers

It took me a while to get into this book but was worth it. It is a powerful story that explores colonialism, AI and sustainability and is wound around the complex College friendship between three of the main protagonists.

Sal Jarvis | Trustee



Mythos
by Stephen Fry

As someone who enjoyed learning about ancient civilizations whilst at school and marvelling at all the characters, this book is a wonderful modern re-telling of these stories written in Stephen Fry's own unique style. Very accessible and great fun!

Nilesh Pandya | Trustee