

# Programmatic approaches to supporting writing for enjoyment

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Our most [recent research](#) shows that writing is at a crisis point. In 2023, fewer than 1 in 3 children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us that they enjoyed writing in their free time. This is one of the lowest levels of writing enjoyment we have recorded since 2010, which means that the number of children and young people who told us that they enjoyed writing in their free time has decreased by a quarter (26.1%) since 2010.

Furthermore, only 1 in 5 told us that they wrote something daily in their free time. Compared with 2010, the number of children and young people who said that they wrote something daily in their free time has decreased by over a quarter (28.5%).

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It is not only writing enjoyment and engagement that are at a low point. [Statutory assessment data](#) showed that in 2022, 69% of pupils aged 11 in England met the expected standard in writing, which is down from 78% in 2019. This means that 1 in 3 (31%) 11-year-olds in England left primary school in 2022 unable to write at the expected level, rising to nearly half (46%) of disadvantaged children. Our [research](#) showed a clear link between enjoyment and attainment, with seven times as many children and young people who enjoyed writing very much writing above the level expected for their age compared with those who did not enjoy writing at all (50.3% vs 7.2%).

Children and young people's agreement with statements about writing in 2023 show that, for many, writing is a personal practice that allows for self-expression and that works as a tool for processing mental-health struggles, making sense of the world, and participating actively in civic life through social connection and supporting social issues.

A concern with the lack of engagement with writing should highlight writing's potential to help children and young people navigate a time of processing and recovery in a post-pandemic society that is as financially challenging as it is geopolitically turbulent.

It is clear that alternative pedagogical approaches open to reframing writing are needed. This report highlights the ways our evidence-based Young Writers programme is supporting schools to develop lasting writing-for-enjoyment practices with the radical view that every young person is a writer. In addition to our well-established Young Poets programme, we piloted a range of new programmes based on our three-pillar model for writing.

## **The three-pillar model for writing**

Based on research and evaluation of our programmes, we have established a three-pillar model for writing. Every school participating in Young Writers is provided with support to use each pillar to help improve students' engagement with writing.

### **Inspiring writing through memorable experiences**

While many teachers have effective strategies for teaching writing, it can be difficult to ignite the spark that inspires students to want to write. Our latest research into writing showed that in 2023, nearly 1 in 2 (48.2%) children and young people struggled to decide what to write about, with memorable experiences featuring as a significant source of inspiration for young writers. Moreover, an [EEF-sponsored efficacy trial](#) showed that writing approaches that used a memorable experience as the inspiration for writing helped children achieve an additional nine months of progress over the course of a year. Providing school visits to galleries, museums and heritage sites therefore helps bring writing to life for students and supports them to become writers outside the classroom.

Anecdotal feedback from many of the teachers who have participated in our Young Poets programme suggests that for many young participants, our memorable experiences are their very first visit to an exhibition, a theatre or even the city centre. Participating educators described this unfortunate phenomenon as students from disadvantaged backgrounds ‘being trapped in their postcodes’ (Blackpool teacher, Young Blackpool Poets 2021/22). A steep decline in school trips caused by budget cuts and increasing school costs has exacerbated this phenomenon.

### **Modelling ‘real’ writing working with professional writers**

Our latest [writing research from 2023](#) clearly outlines that participating in creative-writing groups, meeting authors, and witnessing role models writing for pleasure can be significant sources of inspiration for children and young people who write in their free time. Furthermore, [our latest report on author visits](#) demonstrated a positive relationship between children and young people who reported working with a writer in school and increased levels of enjoyment and confidence in writing.

Working with a professional writer provides young people with the opportunity to move away from experiences of writing in school as a standardised process of planning, drafting and editing, and instead re-experience writing as a messy and deeply experimental creative process.

### **Providing a real audience and a purpose for writing**

It has been acknowledged that [authenticity and real purpose](#) can engage children in writing. Data from a small-scale unpublished evaluation of our pilot project, Amazon Young Storyteller, suggests that becoming a published writer had a positive impact on pupils’ motivation to write and how proud of their writing they felt. Furthermore, performing writing for a real audience, such as at an assembly, a showcase evening for parents, or at a local arts venue, might be a great way to build confidence and increase students’ ability to express themselves.

“Our pupils had a really good time and their self-confidence has shot up by knowing they performed live in front of an audience.” – Stoke-on-Trent teacher, Young Stoke Poets 2022

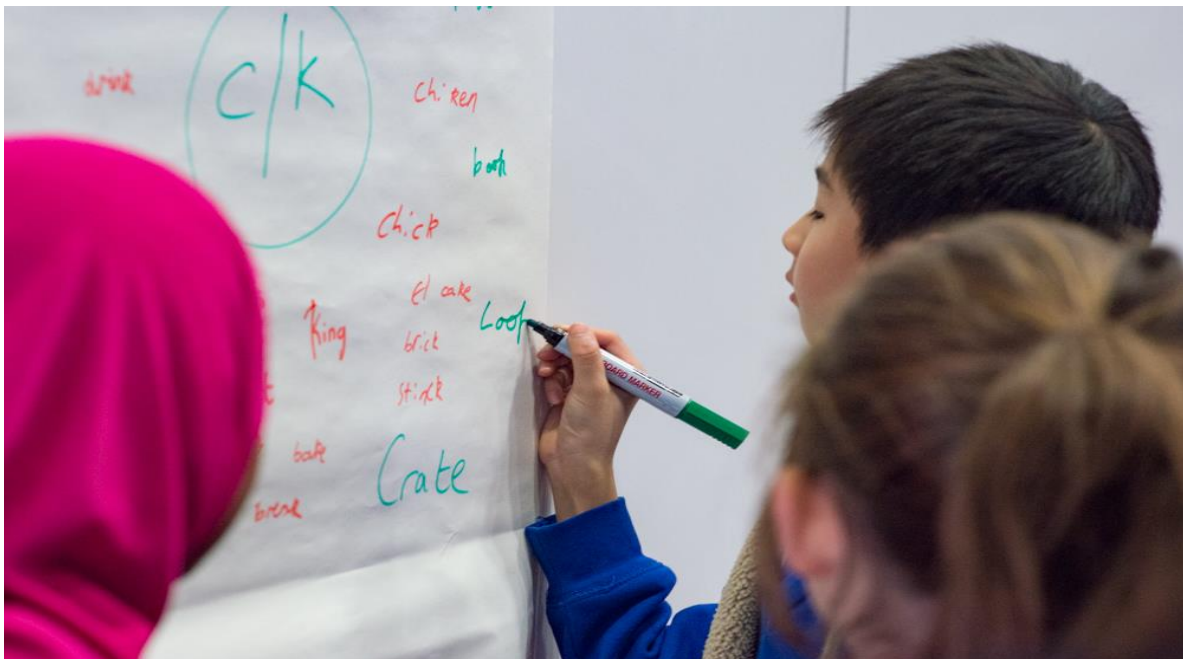
“My favourite part was performing my poem. It also made me a lot more confident because I have never performed in front of different schools.” – Stoke-on-Trent pupil, Young Stoke Poets 2022

“Students felt very proud of their work. We run our own poetry festival in school after the event at the University of Birmingham, which we wouldn’t have done without the project. Our pupils learnt how to use their voice

through poetry, which is a focus of our curriculum.” – Birmingham teacher,  
Young Birmingham Poets 2022

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 for students to experience the excitement of becoming published authors, showcasing their work in published anthologies and zines. We also host readings and performance events for students to perform their writing alongside professional authors.

## Spotlight on Young Poets



Poetry has enjoyed a [boom](#) among young people, with its rise in popularity attributed in part to the ease with which it can be shared on social media. Poets and their creations have never been so relevant and publicly visible, with Warsan Shire’s verses featured in Beyoncé’s iconic album *Lemonade*, Rupi Kaur’s millions of Instagram followers, and Amanda Gorman’s performance at the 2021 US presidential inauguration serving as a few examples.

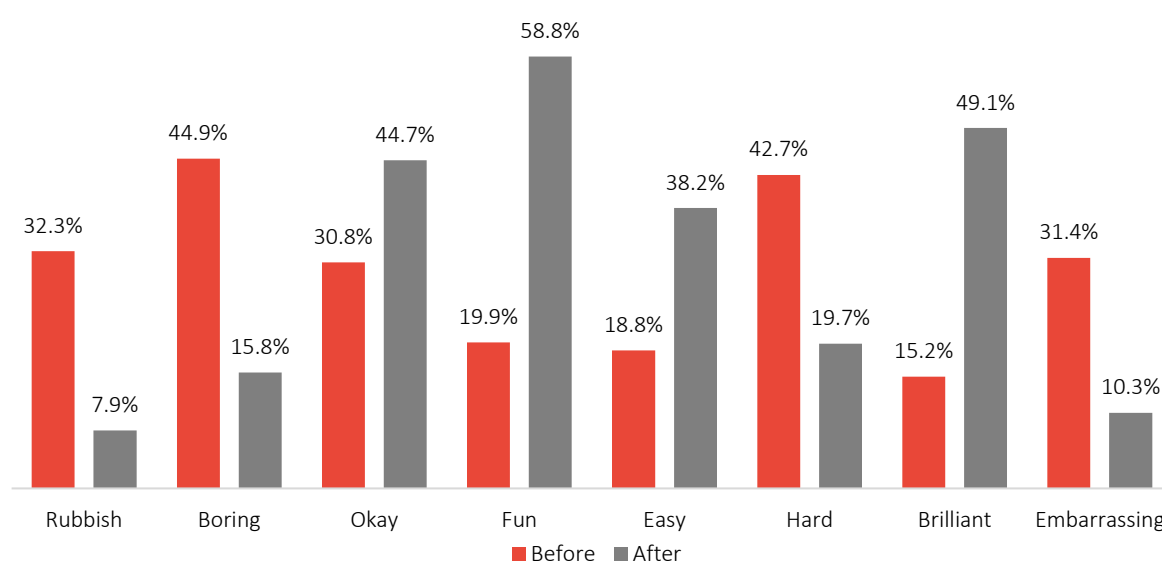
[Our research](#) indicates that poetry has great potential to engage reluctant and non-reluctant young writers because of its formal dynamism and playfulness. Young poetry lovers in fact see poetry as a readily available and energetic tool to support mental wellbeing, express feelings and struggles, escape reality or make sense of the complex events going on in our world. Moreover, every year since 2005, the National Literacy Trust has found that more children and young people on free school meals engage with poetry in their free time than their better-off peers. Over the last eight years, the National Literacy Trust has been running

and developing a poetry programme that supports children and young people from schools with a high percentage of students on free school meals to enjoy their writing.

With Young Poets, teaching poetry is not so much about looking for definitions and learning how to be 'good at' poetry but about exploring how poems work and about playing with language, rhythm, volume and movement to discover each pupil's individual poetic style. Young Poets' process of memorable experiences to help bring writing to life, lively guided discussions, collaborative and individual writing activities led by professional poets, and publishing and performing tasks, enable pupils to engage with literacy on their own terms in a way that also meets national curriculum requirements for writing. Every school participating in Young Poets is provided with support to use our three-pillar approach to writing to galvanise students' engagement with poetry.

The evaluation of the programme has consistently indicated positive outcomes for participating pupils. For example, data collected from 468 pupils aged 8 to 14 who participated in 2021/22 indicated that 3 in 5 pupils said they enjoyed reading (61.9%) and writing (58.9%) poetry more than before. When asked how participating children would describe poetry, three times as many pupils thought of it as 'brilliant' (49.1% vs. 15.2%) or 'fun' (58.8% vs. 19.9%) at the end of the project than at the beginning, and more than twice as many also described it as 'easy' (38.2% vs. 18.8%; see Figure 1). In contrast, the percentage of pupils who thought of poetry as 'rubbish' decreased four-fold (9.7% vs. 32.3%), and the percentage of pupils who thought of it as 'hard' more than halved over the course of the project (19.7% vs. 42.7%).

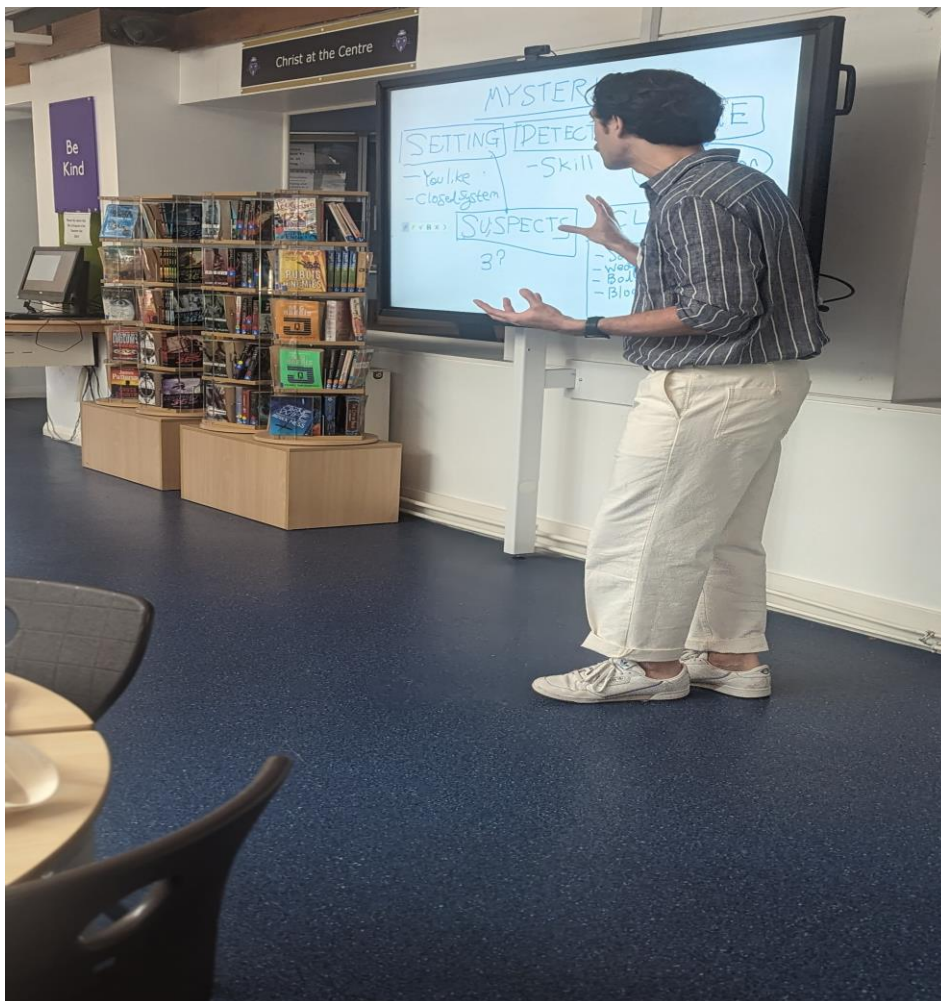
**Figure 1: Words pupils used to describe poetry before and after taking part in Young Poets**





Finally, data from participating pupils also shows that the programme successfully supported their wider writing enjoyment and creativity, with 3 in 5 indicating that they enjoyed writing more after taking part than they did before (62.6%). A similar proportion reported that they felt the programme improved their ability to draw inspiration from their experiences to create something new (63.8%). This suggests that the poetry-writing programme not only supports children's enjoyment of poetry specifically but also children's writing and creativity more generally.

## Spotlight on Young Mystery Writers



When we asked children and young people to tell us about their writing during the [first lockdown in 2020](#), it became clear that for many it had been a time of increased creativity, with children and young people writing everything from songs and stories to scripts, and some even beginning their own novels. Having more time to write freely increased children and young people's enjoyment of writing. However, for many others, disrupted schooling had a negative impact, with [writing enjoyment levels in 2021](#) dropping to the lowest level we had seen in over a decade.

In [2022](#), children and young people’s enjoyment of writing and their writing frequency recovered a little. However, we had little to celebrate, with just over 2 in 5 children and young people enjoying writing and fewer than 1 in 5 writing regularly in their free time. When we asked children and young people who wrote in their free time at least once a month to reflect on the reasons why they wrote, 1 in 2 (49.9%) told us they wrote because it helped them feel creative. We also invited children and young people to tell us in their own words why they wrote or didn’t write. Some shared that they used writing as a form of escapism:

“Writing creates a whole other world that allows you to escape this one.” – Girl, Y10, Annual Literacy Survey 2022

“Writing makes me feel relaxed and immersive, making me feel like I’m in another world.” – Girl, Y12, Annual Literacy Survey 2022

“I write to create my own world that I control and I can make anything happen.” – Boy, Y10, Annual Literacy Survey 2022

This delivered a mandate to provide more opportunities for children and young people to engage with this type of writing, piloting a programme that supports schools with a high percentage of student on free school meals to explore the mystery genre as a creative stimulus and develop mystery-writing projects for their students.

The design for Young Mystery Writers experimented with omitting model texts and using instead a memorable *whodunnit* theatre experience in London’s West End (Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*) and students’ own freewriting (inspired by mystery prompts) as models of the mystery genre. Participants were given the freedom to choose between a script, a short story, and a short short story, which allowed students with different abilities to submit a piece to the Young Mystery Writers Anthology. All students received their own ‘mystery notebook’ and were encouraged to model Agatha Christie’s writing process by looking for inspiration in their everyday world. Christie’s writing process, in fact, started with more than a hundred notebooks in which she made endless notes about everyday events that triggered ideas for her legendary plots.

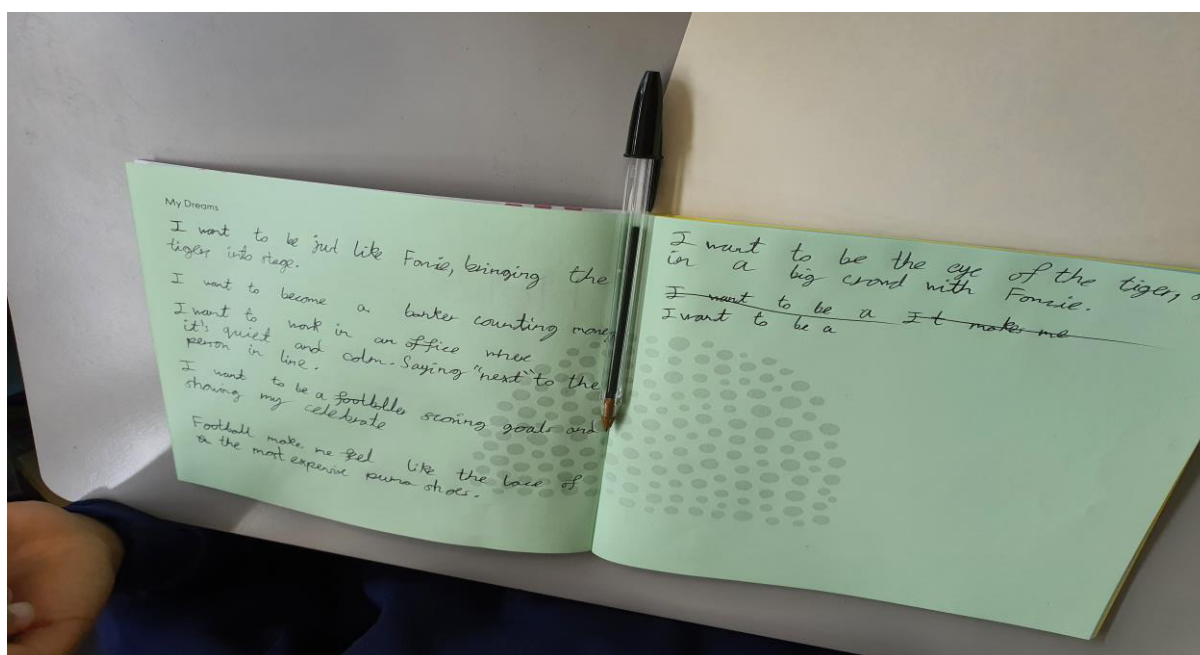
Participating students then spent a half day with a real-life mystery writer to explore ways of editing mystery fiction effectively, and they also received bespoke feedback on their own mystery drafts. Participating classes even received a mini-mystery-class library and started mystery-reading clubs in their schools.

Choosing theatre as the memorable experience also allowed us to address the well-documented drop in young people’s participation in theatre and drama activities. Indeed, [commentators](#) have reported a drop in participation of 47% over 10 years, with young people

from disadvantaged backgrounds the most likely to miss out on such activities. Anecdotal feedback from our participating educators reinforced the value of memorable theatre experiences:

“We had a great time at the theatre yesterday. Our students enjoyed the show. For many of our students it was a first-time visit to the theatre and I believe they all left with some lasting memories.” – London teacher, Young Mystery Writers 2023

## Spotlight on Writing for Wellbeing Clubs



Our [research on mental wellbeing, reading and writing](#) shows that how good children and young people perceive themselves as writers and how often they write something in their free time are linked to their general mental wellbeing. We found that children and young people who enjoyed writing very much and who thought positively about writing had, on average, higher mental-wellbeing scores than their peers who didn't enjoy writing at all and who held negative attitudes towards writing. Notably, 1 in 3 (32.8%) children and young people told us that writing helps them relax.

Our research on children and young people's writing [during the lockdown in 2020](#) also showed that writing made 2 in 5 (41.3%) children and young people feel better, either because they wrote creatively to escape the difficult circumstances of the pandemic or because they wrote to process their feelings. Furthermore, more children and young people who said that writing made them feel better during lockdown wrote poems (66.5% vs. 13.4%), in a diary or journal



(61.9% vs. 14.8%), or a short story or fiction (61.1% vs. 15.1%) compared with their peers who didn't say this.

With [commentators](#) reporting that official NHS data showed a 39% yearly rise in the number of children and young people in England needing treatment for serious mental-health problems, student wellbeing remains an important area of focus for the education community. However, workloads, the cost-of-living crisis, lack of training and staff shortages are barriers to pupils getting the support they need in school.

Previous evaluation findings indicate that many children and young people valued the opportunity to write as a way to process their feelings and thoughts. For example, data from Beyond Words<sup>1</sup>, which invited all children, young people and schools to put their feelings about the year 2020 into words, showed that nearly 3 in 4 felt that the project had made them feel different (72%) and that the project had made them think that writing can help them express their feelings and thoughts (73%). Indeed, a number of participating young people highlighted being able to express their feelings and thoughts as a key benefit of taking part in the programme:

“I thought it was a great opportunity for me and others to express their emotions, thoughts and creativity through this project and it helped me personally to find the courage to write what I wanted to express.”

“It was therapeutic, a chance for me to put my feelings on paper.”

“I enjoyed drawing and writing my feelings and sharing it with you all.”

“It let me express my feelings to people and maybe even people who went through the same thing.”

“Sharing thoughts is good and helps us recognise we are not alone.”

“I felt surprised at how beautiful it is to put feelings into words and how amazing one can feel after finishing a piece of writing. I've realised that maybe it will help that when I'm feeling down, I can put it into poetry. When my piece was put into the gallery, I've suddenly experienced a change in confidence.”

Based on these findings, we designed a programme aimed at exploring and developing therapeutic writing practices in school.

Our Writing for Wellbeing Clubs pilot supports schools to explore therapeutic and reflective writing as a self-sustaining and low-cost tool to promote students' wellbeing. We engaged a

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<sup>1</sup> A programme developed in partnership between National Literacy Trust, the Bupa Foundation, Cheltenham Festivals and Mind, and evaluated by the National Literacy Trust

counsellor and poetry therapist to deliver bespoke training to five professional poets with a keen interest in this area. During the three training days, poets learned techniques that use reflective writing to help young people process their emotions, build confidence and support emotional needs. Following the training, the poets delivered a five-week writing club in school that culminated with the publication of a zine to celebrate everyone's journey. As part of the programme, we also created a teacher-facing resource with starter activities to explore writing for wellbeing practices and a student-facing Writing for Wellbeing Notebook.

Indicative feedback collected from teachers shows that the clubs were positively perceived. All teachers who provided formal feedback indicated that they would recommend the clubs to other schools and that they found the clubs valuable for their students. In their comments, many teachers highlighted the benefits of the clubs for pupils to explore ways to express themselves through writing:

“The Writing for Wellbeing Club was a fantastic opportunity for students to develop their writing skills. Workshops were inclusive for all ages and abilities and it was great to see students express themselves within their work in their own unique ways, which was promoted by the project leader. I felt the tasks opened a creative space and helped young people find new ways of expressing themselves, which will enhance their writing skills.”

“It was an excellent idea, much needed in our school. It offered pupils a chance to explore a style of writing that they otherwise do not get to experience. We saw huge growth in the confidence of some attendees, both inside and outside of the sessions.”

“I saw that by the end of the sessions children had found their own individual ways of expressing themselves through writing, collage and verbal methods. They were really passionate about doing this. This showed a progression in their creativity that will be great for their writing.”

“Pupils do not get a chance to explore this style of writing within our core curriculum. The chance to produce their own work and share this with a professional was also a really powerful experience for some of our students.”

All of the teachers also told us the clubs were especially valuable in supporting pupils' general confidence. This was evident from teachers' comments, many of whom referenced confidence and self-esteem when asked about specific pupils who benefited from the programme:

“I observed a young boy who participated in [poem] collage [making] but did not write a lot. Up until the last session where he seemed to be enjoying

drawing his best outfit on a paper model and wrote words within it which he had not written before.”

“I felt like he had developed confidence to complete this task within a group and had developed enough confidence to write.”

“One student who attended the session was very low in confidence, to the point where she would not even engage with discussions during early sessions. By the end of the course, she had begun writing poetry in her own time, and brought this to share with our lead writer after one of the sessions. Other school staff have also commented on her increased confidence since sessions began, and we hope to have her work published in the zine, which I think will boost her confidence further.”

“One Year 8 student came the first week and nearly lost his place on the workshop due to poor behaviour and offensive comments. After explaining to the student that their behaviour had likely got them removed from the course they completely opened up about how much they struggle to control certain areas of their conduct and that they hate themselves for it. We supported the child to stay in the workshops for the remaining weeks and his self-esteem and overall wellbeing has risen massively, which is down to the child genuinely sensing understanding from the facilitator and other supporting adults. He has gone on to create a piece that he is truly proud of and this has been able to be fed back to home also.”

## Spotlight on The Power of Voice



Our [Children and Young People’s Writing in 2023 research](#) showed that 1 in 7 (14.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 write to support causes and issues they care about or because it makes them feel connected to the world. To develop further insights into this writing practice, we grouped these two motivation items to form the ‘social writer’ category. More children and young people who received free school meals said that they were social writers compared with their more affluent peers. This delivered a clear mandate to provide more opportunities for children experiencing financial disadvantage to engage with this type of writing, piloting a programme that supports schools with high percentages of students on free school meals to develop social action literacy projects for their students.

The Power of Voice aims to empower young people to tell the stories that matter to them, harnessing the power of writing to share experiences with a real audience and drive change. A group of selected professional ‘change-maker’ authors with relevant writing practice guide the young people to develop techniques and skills such as independent research, exploring different perspectives, communicating ideas, writing independently and editorial examination of their work.

Across the five weeks, students are encouraged to explore their civic identities inspired by the ‘change-maker’ author and use their own voices to reach a specific audience of their choice by selecting a form for their piece. Students are encouraged to use their home languages and dialects and the professional authors are selected to represent the communities that make up the schools.

The programme culminates in a social action school assembly for students to share their writing with a live audience of peers and the publication of a celebratory zine.

## Conclusion

Going forward, we will continue to explore programmatic approaches to supporting writing for enjoyment in schools with the ambition to build on the existing evidence base and produce ground-breaking pedagogical insights. We will do so by conducting evaluations of the pilots and monitoring the impact of the more established programmes. We will also continue to explore innovative programmatic approaches that are based on the best available evidence and are aimed at reconnecting children and young people with the creative elements that transform writing into a pleasurable personal practice.

Together, the exploratory approaches and the expanding evidence base will allow us to support children and young people’s writing in the best possible way.