



Change your story

The Impact of Writing for Enjoyment Programmes

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Executive summary

In 2023, only 1 in 3 children and young people said that they enjoyed writing in their free time (Clark et al., 2023¹). This report highlights the role of our Young Writers Programme in encouraging writing for enjoyment. Through memorable experiences, working with professional writers and by providing a real purpose and audience, Young Writers inspires children and young people to develop a personal writing practice. Pupils who take part in Young Writers feel more confident in their writing abilities, enjoy writing more, and see writing for enjoyment more positively. The programme prioritises agency, empowering pupils to choose what they write about and the format they write in. Teachers recognise the impact of different Young Writers projects, and how the different pedagogical elements inspire pupils to write for enjoyment.



¹ https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Writing_in_2023.pdf

Introduction

Children and young people’s writing is at crisis point. In 2023, only 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoyed writing in their free time. Overall, there has been a 26% decrease in writing for enjoyment since 2010 (Clark et al., 2023²).

The downward trajectory of writing for enjoyment in children and young people is concerning. Research has shown that writing for enjoyment is associated with improved wellbeing (Acar et al., 2020³), helping individuals process complex emotions such as grief (Den Elzen et al., 2023⁴), as well as supporting children and young people in expressing themselves (Teravainen-Goff, 2021⁵). Indeed, in 2023 we found that more children and young people aged 8 to 18 write for self-expression than any other reason (Clark et al., 2023⁶). At a time when children and young people have reported being less happy compared with previous years (The Children’s Society, 2023⁷), finding outlets to support wellbeing remains paramount, with creative writing featuring as a readily available self-sustaining low-cost tool to promote wellbeing.

There is also a link between writing for enjoyment and writing attainment. Our data show that children and young people who enjoy writing are seven times more likely to be working above the expected writing standard (23.2% vs 3.2%; Clark & Teravainen, 2017⁸). As such, supporting writing engagement remains a vital tool in

² https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Writing_in_2023.pdf

³ <https://doi.org/10.1002/jocb.485>

⁴ <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2022.2160967>

⁵ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/beyond-words-writing-for-wellbeing-evaluation-of-the-project/>

⁶ https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Writing_in_2023.pdf

⁷ <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/good-childhood>

⁸ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/writing-enjoyment-and-its-link-wider-writing-findings-our-annual-literacy-survey-2016-report/>

recovering possible lost learning from COVID-impacted school closures and helping more children reach their potential.

Our Young Writers Programme offers a solution to schools that seek to develop lasting writing-for-enjoyment practices. Believing that every young person is a writer, our programme uses a three-pillar model that emphasises the importance of memorable experiences, working with professional authors and providing a real audience and purpose for writing (see pages 4 to 5). We work with schools seeking to improve pupils' writing engagement in a way that also meets national curriculum requirements for writing.

This report

This report brings together insights from the various writing programmes that sit within Young Writers to highlight the important role they can play in the lives of children and young people. Using information from different sources, such as surveys and comments from our participants, we bring to light how writing enjoyment can be supported by designing programmes that celebrate the efforts of the young writers they support.

After taking part in the programmes, participants are invited to respond to post-reflective surveys about their experiences. This is a summary of the insight used in this report for each project:

- **Young Poets:** Young Poets supports pupils to engage with poetry through memorable experiences, guided discussions, writing activities led by professional poets, and publishing and performance opportunities. 145 pupils from Year 5 to Year 11 responded to the post-reflective survey.
- **Young Mystery Writers:** Young Mystery Writers draws on a memorable theatre experience, a half day with a mystery author and publishing opportunities to explore how this exciting genre keeps readers captivated. 114 pupils in Year 7 to 9, as well as 10 teachers, responded to the post-reflective survey.
- **Writing for Wellbeing Clubs:** Our Writing for Wellbeing Clubs support schools to explore therapeutic writing practices with a fully subsidised writing club led by a trained professional poet. Four teachers responded to the post-reflective survey.
- **The Power of Voice:** The Power of Voice supports pupils in Years 7 to 9 to explore their civic identities and use their own voices to reach a specific audience by selecting a form for their written piece with the help of a group

of selected professional 'change-maker' authors. 46 pupils responded to the post-reflective survey.

- **Wicked Writers:** Wicked Writers: Be the Change is a competition open to pupils aged 9 to 14 where pupils are tasked with writing a persuasive piece of writing about environmental issues that are important to them. 14 teachers responded to the post-reflective survey.
 - **West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate Programme:** The West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate Programme aimed to inspire the next generation of young poets in West Yorkshire, with a week of poet-led school activities and a competition to appoint the first ever Young Poet Laureates for West Yorkshire. 18 teachers responded to our post-reflective survey.
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“**[Young Writers] opened up a new door for me to explore, finding new writing techniques, how to grab the [reader’s] attention, how to structure a story (detailing every part) and overall, how to add the finishing touches.**”

(Pupil, Year 7)

Young Writers' 'Three-Pillar Model' for writing



1) Inspiring writing through memorable experiences

Participants visit local galleries, museums and heritage sites as a source of inspiration. In 2023, nearly 1 in 2 (48.2%) children and young people struggled deciding what to write about. By taking writing outside the classroom and bringing it to life, we can create a gateway into writing for enjoyment (Clark et al., 2023⁹).

2) Modelling 'real' writing working with professional writers

We know that there is a link between children and young people who have the opportunity to work with a writer in school and positive writing behaviours (Clark & Picton, 2023¹⁰). By taking part in writing experiences with professional writers, children move away from the standardised process they learn in a school environment and re-experience writing as a creative and experimental process.



⁹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-writing-in-2023/>

¹⁰ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/author-visits-in-schools-in-2023/>



3) Providing a real audience and purpose for writing

By providing pupils with a real audience and purpose for their writing, we might be better positioned to engage them in writing (Ross & Young, 2021¹¹) and instil a sense of pride and confidence in their writing. A real audience and purpose also revitalises and refocuses the editing process. We continue to find different ways to provide meaningful audiences and purpose, such as publishing zines and anthologies, as well as hosting performance/live-reading opportunities

Impact on pupils' writing

To explore the impact of our programmes on pupils' writing overall, we combined insights from post-reflective surveys from two of our well-established writing programmes: Young Poets and Young Mystery Writers.

In total, 259 pupils aged 10 to 16¹² responded to a survey about their experience with either Young Poets ($n = 145$) or Young Mystery Writers ($n = 114$).

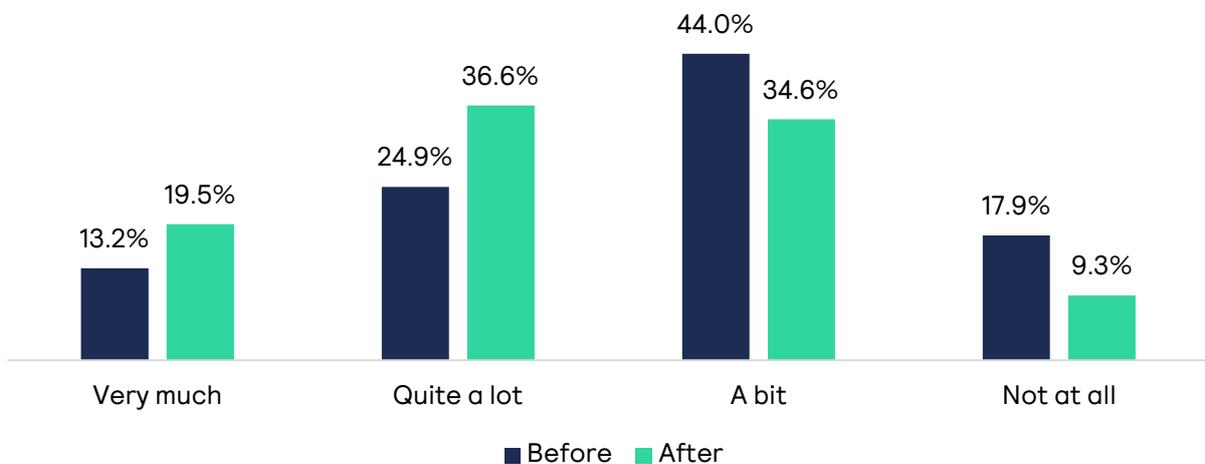
Only 2 in 5 (38.1%) pupils told us that they enjoyed writing either very much (13.2%) or quite a lot (24.9%) before they started participating in our programme (see Figure 1). At the end of the programme, the percentage of children and young

¹¹ <https://www.routledge.com/Writing-for-Pleasure-Theory-Research-and-Practice/Young-Ferguson/p/book/9780367219529>

¹² 30.8% ($n = 77$) of respondents identified as boys, 59.2% ($n = 148$) identified as girls, 1.6% ($n = 4$) described themselves another way and 8.4% ($n = 21$) chose not to say. Across the sample, 26.2% ($n = 66$) received FSMs, 52.8% did not ($n = 133$), 16.3% ($n = 41$) didn't know and 4.8% ($n = 12$) told us they would rather not say.

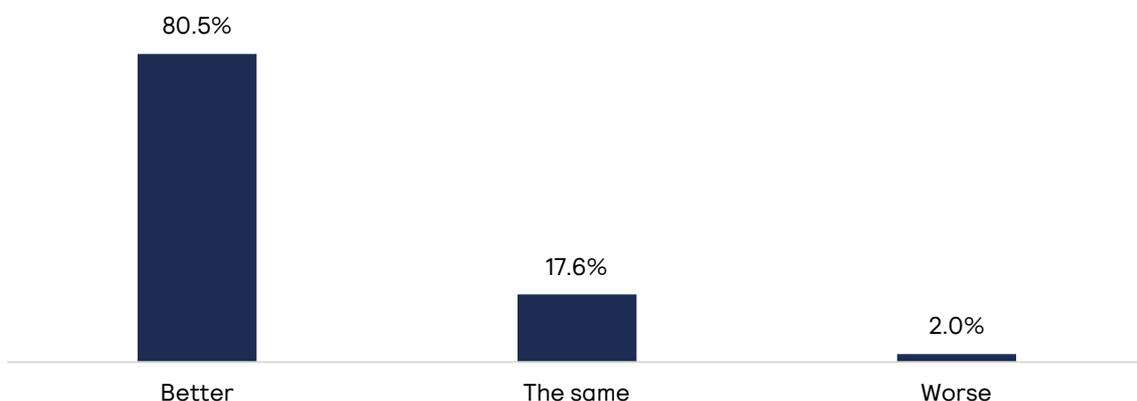
people who enjoyed writing had increased, with nearly 3 in 5 (56.1%) telling us that they now enjoyed writing either 'very much' (19.5%) or 'quite a lot' (36.6%). At the same time, the percentage of children and young people who said they didn't enjoy writing at all almost halved, from 17.9% before taking part in the programme to 9.3% afterwards.

Figure 1: Pupils' general writing enjoyment before and after taking part in Young Poets and Young Mystery Writers



Across our Young Writers programmes, one key outcome is to promote children and young people's confidence in their writing abilities. Indeed, as shown in Figure 2, after taking part in either Young Poets or Young Mystery Writers, 4 in 5 (80.5%) pupils told us that they felt that they were better at writing.

Figure 2: Improvement in writing from pupil perspective after taking part in Young Poets or Young Mystery Writers



We were keen to explore how pupils' perceptions of writing change after taking part in one of our Young Writers programmes. As Figure 3 shows, pupils' perceptions towards writing improved after taking part in one of our programmes. After taking part in either Young Poets or Young Mystery Writers, fewer pupils told us that they would describe writing¹³ as 'embarrassing' (-30.5pp), 'rubbish' (-27.0pp), 'boring' (-12.8pp) or 'hard' (-15.1pp). At the same time, more children and young people described writing as 'easy' (+10.4pp), 'brilliant' (+27.4pp) and 'fun' (+37.4pp) after taking part.

Figure 3: Pupils' descriptions of poetry/stories before and after taking part in Young Poets or Young Mystery Writers



Spotlight on showcasing and sharing writing

¹³ For our Young Poets programme, we asked about poetry enjoyment. For our Young Mystery Writers, we asked about the stories they wrote, which were either in the form of a short story or a script.

Young Poets

Looking at our Young Poets programme more closely, 1 in 5 (18.1%)¹⁴ pupils told us that prior to taking part in the programme, they had not written poetry. Having the option to share their work through performance or publication at the end gave pupils something to work towards. When asked what they thought about performing, one pupil told us:

“I was a little bit nervous, but I felt proud when I finished.”

(Pupil in Nottingham, Young Poets)

There was also an opportunity for the young people to share their work with others. 45.1% told us that they performed their poetry and 15.3% told us that their work was published in the anthology.

The different opportunities for writing poetry provided in Young Poets meant that different parts of the programme appealed to different pupils. As seen by the pupil comments below, some students told us that performing was their favourite part of Young Poets:

“My favourite part was when we were put into groups and performed [our poems].”
(Pupil, Nottingham)

¹⁴ Of the 145 pupils who responded to our post-project survey, 45.8% ($n = 66$) were from London, 23.6% ($n = 34$) were from Nottingham, 16.7% ($n = 24$) were from Blackpool and 13.9% ($n = 20$) were from Bradford.

“My favourite part was when I performed in front of people.” (Pupil, Bradford)

“My favourite part was when everyone got to perform their poems.” (Pupil, Nottingham)

“My favourite part was saying our poems.” (Pupil, Bradford)

“I most enjoyed sharing poetry with classmates.” (Pupil, London)

“I loved sharing my poems and working with my group.” (Pupil, Nottingham)



Inspiring young people through memorable experiences

Young Mystery Writers

As part of the Young Mystery Writers programme, pupils and teachers went on a memorable trip to the theatre and worked with a professional author. Some pupils

and teachers highlighted how impactful these experiences had been and said what made the programme so beneficial:

“My favourite part was when we went to see the play as it gave me a lot of inspiration.” (Pupil, Year 8)

“Pupils really enjoyed the topic, and it inspired them to read more mystery books. They all had a wonderful time at the theatre and were gripped by the play. Pupils raved about Patrice Lawrence’s visit and were really interested in her life as an author.” (Teacher)

“I loved everything about this workshop, it changed my life, and I can’t convey my feelings in words. It’s just amazing!” (Pupil, Year 7)

“What I really enjoyed about the Mystery Writers is the workshop and trip since they played a great part in helping me find ideas for my story. It opened up a new door for me to explore, finding new writing techniques, how to grab the [reader’s] attention, how to structure a story (detailing every part) and overall, how to add the finishing touches. It was a great experience for me at school especially as a Year 7 because it provided me with hope and has given me more confidence in trying out hobbies and ideas.” (Pupil, Year 7)

“I think for some of our students from a deprived area, the programme had a big impact as it offered students a visit to the theatre, engagement with a professional writer and the opportunity to improve their writing skills.” (Teacher)

Therapeutic writing

Writing for Wellbeing clubs

While all our writing programmes aim to encourage and support writing for enjoyment in different ways, in 2022–23, we piloted a programme that focused specifically on writing for wellbeing. Working with a team of professional poets trained by counsellor and poetry therapist Charmaine Pollard, the clubs inspired pupils to develop a personal therapeutic writing practice that would help them process their experiences, build confidence, and support their emotional needs.

Teachers told us how the Writing for Wellbeing clubs allowed the pupils involved to feel heard and listened to, enabling them to express themselves:

“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.” (Teacher)

“The children were always excited to have their sessions. The sessions seem to be very open to the needs and methods of the children. Working with young people instead of against them seemed to be a big part of the working ethos.” (Teacher)

“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 which will be great for their writing.” (Teacher)

“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.” (Teacher)

The importance of voice

The Power of Voice and Wicked Writers

The Power of Voice supports pupils from Years 7 to 9 to develop and articulate their civic identity through writing, i.e. their understanding of their place within their community, and a knowledge of how they can make a difference (Allen & Kidd, 2022¹⁵, Haduong et al., 2023¹⁶). Over four weeks, pupils work with professional

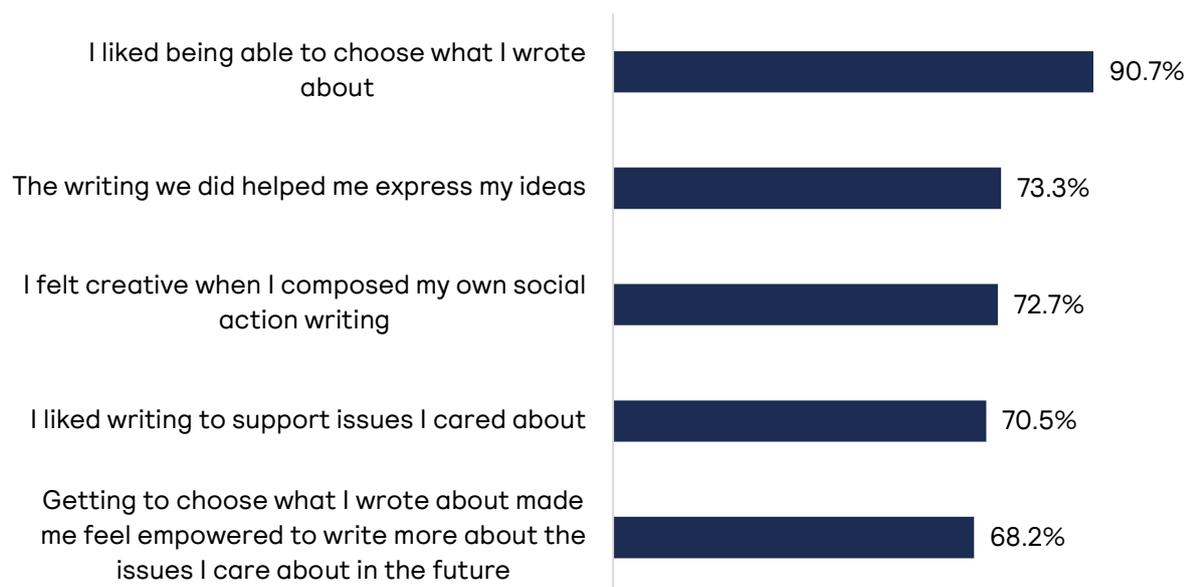
¹⁵ <https://scholar.harvard.edu/danielleallen/publications/civic-learning-21st-century-disentangling-%E2%80%9Cthin%E2%80%9D-and-%E2%80%9Cthick%E2%80%9D-elements>

¹⁶ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17461979231151616>

‘change-maker’ authors to write about an issue that is important to them. Pupils can work across a range of forms, and they are encouraged to use their own voice. As shown in the celebratory zine¹⁷, pupils write about a range of important issues, including gun violence, climate change, war, body image and homelessness. 46 pupils provided feedback after taking part in the pilot programme in the spring of 2023.

As Figure 5 shows, most (90.7%) young people told us that they liked being able to choose what they wrote about. More than 7 in 10 said that the writing they did allowed them to express themselves (73.3%) and feel creative (72.7%). 7 in 10 also told us they liked writing to support issues they cared about (70.5%) and that getting to choose what they wrote about made them feel empowered to write more about the issues they cared about in the future (68.2%).

Figure 5: Pupils’ reflections on The Power of Voice programme



¹⁷ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/young-writers/the-power-of-voice/celebrating-the-power-of-voice-a-social-action-writing-project/>

“My favourite part was when we looked at people who are famous activists. It really inspired me and made me realise I can make a difference and even if it’s a small difference, it’s still a difference.”

(Pupil, The Power of Voice)

“I liked how we were able to make our own writing about social issues that affect us or others around us.”

(Pupil, The Power of Voice)

Empowering children and young people to use their voice is paramount, so giving children and young people a platform to do so is a core part of our methodology. Alongside The Power of Voice, the Wicked Writers: Be the Change competition works in partnership with the West End musical *Wicked*¹⁸ to do just that. 8 in 10 children and young people aged 8 to 15 believe that looking after the environment is important and that more ought to be done (Natural England, 2022¹⁹). As part of Wicked Writers: Be the Change, pupils aged 9 to 14 are tasked with writing a persuasive piece about any environmental issue that is important to them, such as the climate crisis, pollution and endangered species. The winner receives theatre tickets for their class, an author visit and a book bundle, and all shortlisted students are celebrated in an anthology. When highlighting the impact of the competition, one teacher told us:

¹⁸ <https://www.wickedthemusical.co.uk/>

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2022-update/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2022-update>

“It was good to have a positive theme which students could interpret in many ways and use to consider elements of their own identity and aspirations.” (Teacher)



Working with a professional author

West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate Programme

More children and young people aged 8 to 18 who have had an author visit tell us that they enjoy writing (43.2% vs 32.2%; Clark & Picton, 2023²⁰). As highlighted in our second writing pillar (page 4), creating opportunities for children and young people to work with real-life authors is a key part of our Young Writers programme. The series of events we ran for West Yorkshire Poetry Week and the West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate competition in partnership with the Mayor of West Yorkshire,

²⁰ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/author-visits-in-schools-in-2023/>

Tracy Brabin, and National Poet Laureate Simon Armitage were no different. Poets visited schools virtually or in person and resources were provided to teachers and staff to facilitate poetry sessions. Teachers told us what made the visits so valuable, highlighting that the visit inspired the pupils:

“[Pupils were inspired the most by] the poet’s visit.” (Teacher)

“[The greatest benefit to pupils was] hearing the story of the local poet and being able to produce a piece of poetry in the session.” (Teacher)

“Working with a real poet from the local area [was the most valuable part].”
(Teacher)

“It was great to have a local poet visit and share his story to inspire the children.”
(Teacher)

“[The poet] shared his story and inspired the children to write poetry. The tasks which he provided were easy for all children to follow regardless of their ability. All children enjoyed writing a range of short poems.” (Teacher)

As part of the West Yorkshire Young Poet Laureate Programme, shortlisted pupils in Year 4, Year 9 and Year 10 were invited to a masterclass session at Bradford Central Library, where they took part in activities supported by professional poets. This small-group mentoring allowed them to develop the poetry they already had, encouraging their performance abilities and editing. Indeed, when we asked what was most valuable, the two teachers who responded to our post-reflective survey highlighted working with professional poets:

“Working with Simon Armitage and other professional poets. Giving poetry such a valuable forum. Thank you so much.” (Teacher)

“Opportunity to engage with authors and develop their own craft in workshops.”
(Teacher)

You can read more about the chosen poets and what they’re doing to celebrate poetry in West Yorkshire on our website²¹.

²¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/young-writers/west-yorkshire-poet-laureate-competition/celebrating-west-yorkshire-young-poets/>

Conclusion

Overall, while writing for enjoyment is in crisis and skills are declining, this report shows that our Young Writers Programme can successfully support young people's writing by allowing pupils to play with language, rhythm, volume and movement to explore how writing works and discover their individual writing style. We believe that writing is for everyone and that there are no limits, no lost causes, and no last chances.

Looking across our programmes, we can see the various strengths and impact of the 'Three-Pillar Model' for writing. In providing memorable experiences across programmes such as Young Mystery Writers and Young Poets, worlds of ideas are opened up to pupils, inspiring new and exciting writing. By working with professional writers, students learn from those they can relate to and are given a chance to fall in love with writing inspired by the journeys of real writing practice. Lastly, by providing pupils with a real audience and a purpose to talk about issues they care about in programmes such as The Power of Voice and Wicked Writers, pupils are empowered to take control of their writing, boosting their confidence and belief in their own writing efficacy and abilities.

Going forward, we will continue to explore programmatic approaches to supporting writing for enjoyment in schools based on the best available evidence. Our ambition is to build on the existing evidence base to produce ground-breaking pedagogical insights. We will do so by designing and evaluating new pilot programmes and continuing to monitor the impact of our more established programmes.

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