

# Meaningful, Memorable Learning at Horfield CEVC Primary School, Bristol

## UKLA Literacy School of the Year 2017

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An exploration of the creative, cross-curricular approach to the teaching of English at Horfield Church of England Primary School so that learning engages children's hearts and minds and is completely irresistible.

In 2017 we were honoured to be recognised as the United Kingdom Literacy Association Literacy School of the Year. We were very proud of the way in which our approach to English teaching and learning was praised by the visiting judges. Our mentor, Trish Dodds (former School Improvement Officer for Bristol Local Authority and the Local Authority Lead for English), noted, in October 2016, that the 'range of activities that the children have the opportunity to engage with is outstanding'. Some of the successful strategies we use to promote and embed meaningful, memorable learning at Horfield Church of England Primary School are celebrated in this article in which we hope to provide an overview of the way in which children learn at our school, which, according the UKLA judges is 'A school where Literacy thrives'.



### 'Metaphorically Speaking'

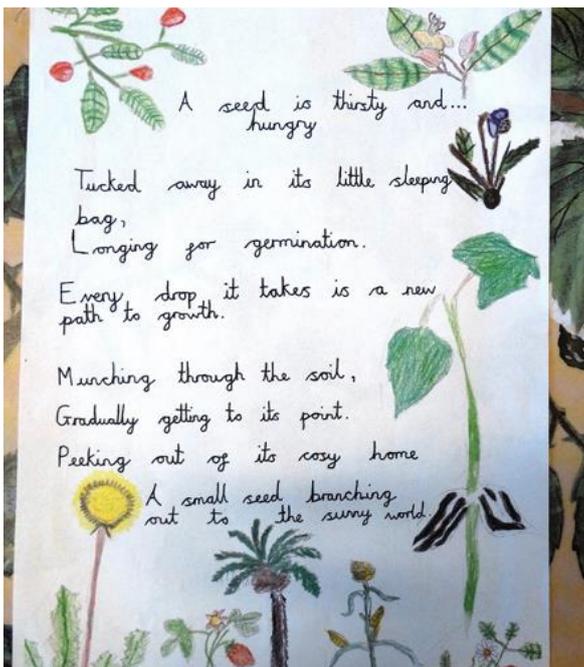
Our whole school year begins with our learning metaphor. This unifying theme draws us together as a school. Staff choose a powerful image for the metaphor (for example, Seeds and New Life in 2016 – 17) that can be applied to all curriculum subjects and areas of learning. We buy a large range of themed, inspiring texts for children and staff to enjoy and respond to through poetry, drama, art and writing.

Whatever their year group, in this way children begin the year with a deep idea that enables them to respond in a creative way. They are exposed to challenging and meaningful texts so that they can reflect on how language can have many layers and meanings. This enables us to demonstrate our distinctiveness as a school in a way that encourages all children to feel part of a learning community.

The metaphor is the focus of the first INSET day of the year. Our aim is to harness the exceptional creative talent we have in our school; teachers interpret the metaphor in their own ways. Teacher autonomy is important to us at Horfield.

**'I love the whole school metaphors, such as Seeds and New Life. It says to the children that we are thinking of the wider world, lifting our eyes to a broader context.'** Year 5 parent

The first two weeks of the school year introduce children to the metaphor. This is shown visually through the creation of a central display which celebrates children's creative responses. For example, in 2016 we chose Seeds and New Life and each child wrote a poem based on the powerful text *A Seed is Sleepy* (Aston 2014). Through the writing of poetry, children reflected on the incredible world of seeds and how they are able to produce such a diverse range of flowers and trees.



**Year 4 Poem:  
A seed is thirsty and hungry**

## Cohesion and Consistency

Yvette Kydd is our greatly respected English Subject Leader and her task in 2015 - 2016 was to raise standards in English across the board. She began by encouraging staff to spend time embedding the basics in order to lay the foundations for high quality writing. She also provided staff training in 'Point, Evidence, Explain' to encourage a disciplined, academic approach to the analysis and interpretation of texts. Alongside this she ran a series of staff meetings to enhance staff knowledge, particularly with respect to the new national English Punctuation Grammar and Spelling test. Yvette recognised that the writing emphasis across the school needed to shift, to encourage children to think about **how** they're writing, not what. For example, it was important to get them to think about the impact of a well-placed semi-colon; or how manipulating the clauses in a sentence could change the meaning or emphasis; how hiding the agent in a sentence can increase the tension. Once this was established staff were more able to be creative in their responses to texts as seen in the examples celebrated in this article.

The success of this school improvement initiative was due to both Yvette's dissemination of her outstanding subject knowledge and the great culture of staff teamwork which exists within a supportive, non-judgemental environment at Horfield School.

For us, cohesion and consistency across the school are extremely important evidenced through the adoption of similar approaches from Reception to Year 6. All staff adapt the same model of using appropriately challenging texts to teach creativity, understanding and appreciation of quality texts, and do this cross-curricularly. However, our whole school approach is NOT prescriptive. A great deal of autonomy is permitted and, indeed, positively encouraged along with differing creative approaches. In this way staff can find their own level of comfort and creativity without feeling pressured to conform to a particular model.

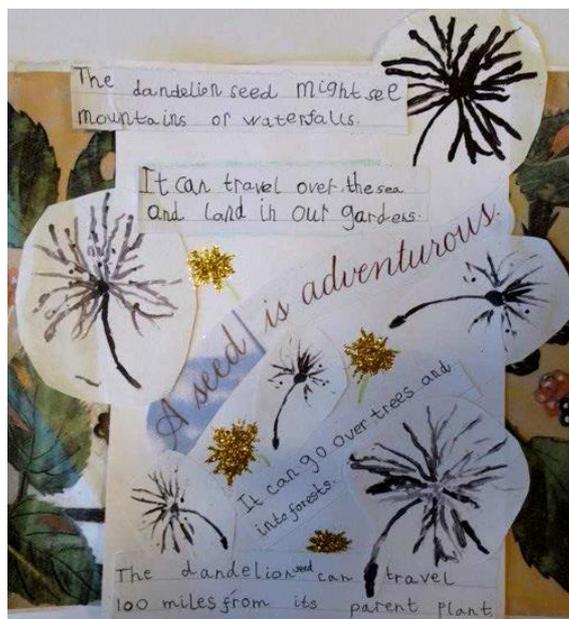
Consequently, creativity plays a vital role in the Horfield School ethos and is truly embedded throughout the school. Teachers love to inspire one another by suggesting new and exciting ideas which are embraced by the whole team. Staff particularly enjoy exploring texts in creative ways in order to bring stories to life for the children. Texts are studied on a deep and often profound level. A 'creative buzz' is created around a text. The lines between creativity and English are blurred, smudged and often completely erased.

### **Imagination Station – a cross –curricular approach to writing: 'An English book gone wild.' Year Three child**

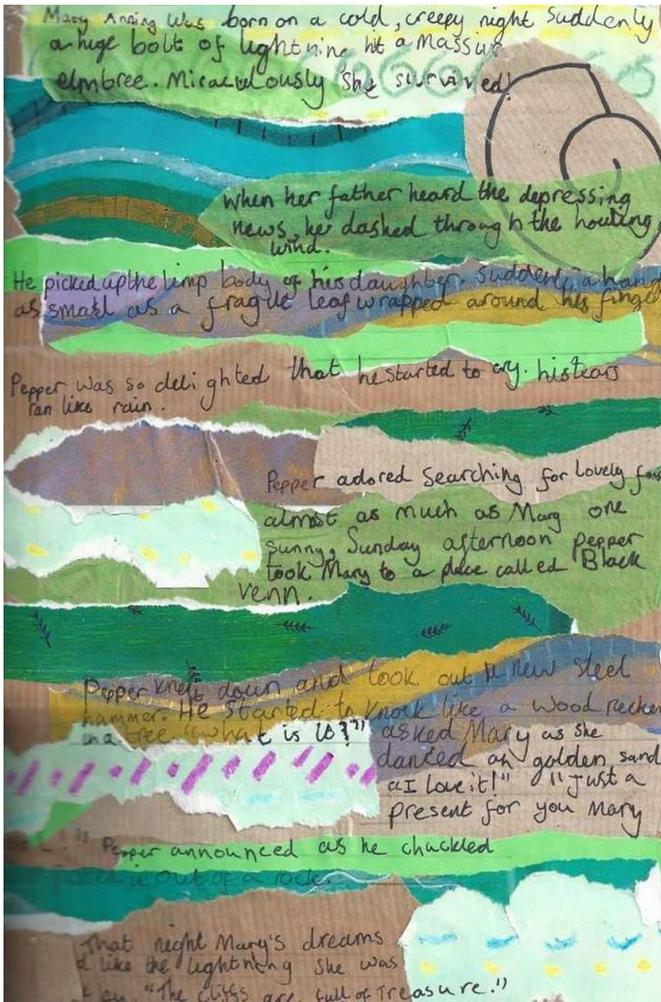
This home-grown initiative was created by Laurel Steel, a Year 3 teacher and Assistant Head at Horfield School. During a Pupil Progress meeting Laurel's Year Three writing data was discussed. The main inhibitors to the writing progress were unpicked: a reluctance to take risks, worries about making mistakes from some children and, conversely, a lack of care and pride in their work from others. Laurel and the Headteacher Jenny Taylor considered how to address these issues in a new way and a cross-curricular approach was developed by Laurel linking creative writing and art which she named Imagination Station. These writing/art lessons provide children with the freedom to express themselves and create something unique. In the words of one of our Year 3 children: 'It's an English book gone wild!'

This approach is inspired by an artist's sketchbook way of working. To an artist, a sketchbook can be a diverse and vital tool. Artists use sketchbooks to collect, experiment with and record ideas and also make notes, deepen their thinking, make connections, play with ideas and externalize what is inside their heads. Every child at our school has an Imagination Station sketchbook and these are treasured. By the end of Year 6 they are a beautiful collection of imaginative artistic responses, including writing inspired by artwork and artwork inspired by writing. Children experiment with different media or celebrate the style of an illustrator. This highlights and explores visual representations of a text – both those on the page and the images we create in our own imagination as we read. Poetry, word banks, art work and extended pieces of writing sit side by side. Playful presentation is vital. We constantly strive to make learning meaningful and memorable and we have found that high quality presentation supports us with this.

The creative response to English pervades our whole curriculum. In their 'Rocks and Soils' Science Topic, Year 3 studied the wonderful text, 'Stone Girl Bone Girl' (Anholt 2006) about Mary Anning, the fossil hunter from Lyme Regis. They discovered 'dinosaur eggs' in Laurel's classroom (made to her own special recipe!) which contained 'baby sentences'. Once opened, their challenge was to extend them by adding adverbs, adjectives and embedded clauses.



**Year 1 Poem: A Seed is adventurous**



**Year 3 Writing: Hidden sentences inside torn paper sedimentary rock**



**Year 3 children opening dinosaur eggs to reveal baby sentences**

Tearing and physically manipulating the sentences for this task really helped them to develop their understanding of using embedded clauses in particular. Multi-sensory learning that engages multiple areas of the brain creates a 'memory splash!' The bigger the splash, the more memorable the learning. The creativity in this example is the learning; it's not an add-on. Once children had transformed their sentences they hid them inside torn paper sedimentary rock to mirror the 'dark and dangerous treasure' that Mary Anning finds in the cliffs.

Children studied the formation of caves in sedimentary rock. Kirsten Cunningham (Assistant Head and Year 3 Science Teacher) introduced the children to the book *Blue John* (Doherty 2017) to capture the mystery of the Blue John Cavern in the Peak District and linked the legend to the science of caves. After studying rock from this cavern children used Brusho to explore the blue gold strata in their Art lessons and collected words linking language through descriptive word choices and scientific vocabulary. In this way, Science, Art and English were linked, and the children had explored English through their Science topic.

To explore develop the more complex skills of inference and deduction, Laurel prepared a series of English lessons focused on an exploration of *The Selfish Giant* (Wilde 1888) with cross-curricular links to RE to reveal underlying themes, the subtext and the author's voice within the text. Her Year 3 pupils examined the story closely and spotted messages hidden beneath the words for them to dig up. They created a garden with the hidden messages that they found. Children's ideas were supported with evidence from the text which they wrote on labels to add to their special gardens. They brought their gardens to life by writing descriptive phrases on spring leaves and winter snowflakes which they added to their bare tree branches. Children commented, 'When someone looks at our garden, they can only see the words on the surface but we know that something much deeper is buried underneath just like in *The Selfish Giant*. In this way, children began to understand the key concept of 'Point, Evidence, Explain' in English comprehension.

In 2015 – 2016 an opportunity arose for Yvette and Kirsty to take part in the UKLA Book Awards as Teacher Judges. They particularly valued the opportunity to read the range of high quality children's books and to share their views with other teachers across the city. Once a shortlist had been agreed the full set of books was purchased for our school use. This takes place every year and ensures that our Library shelves are restocked with a wealth of new and captivating books. Teachers from every class then choose a book from the shortlist to study with their class. An example of this was *The Pilot and the Little Prince: The Life of Antoine de Saint-Exupery* (Sis 2014). Amy Parkin, a Year 6 teacher, selected this book because it linked so well with that year's whole school metaphor of Flight. Children began by listening to the beginning of this biography and then explored examples of different flying machines and used the images to invent their own.

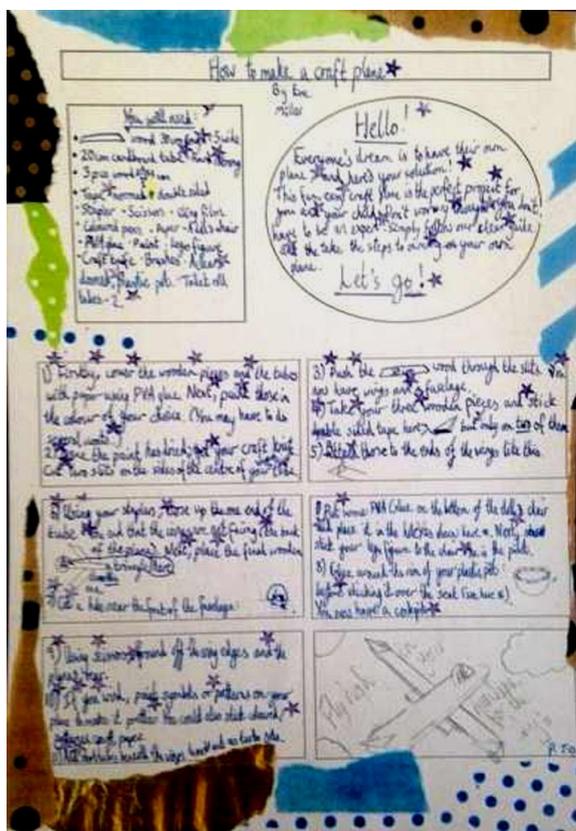
'I found it interesting to learn about Antoine's life story and his adventures. Antoine dreamed of flying a plane at a time when planes were just being invented; it must have been an exciting time to be alive. I enjoyed having the chance to invent my own flying machine; we let our imaginations fly freely.'

Jessie, Year 6

Children created a collage using decorative papers. Next, they wrote instructions on how to build their flying machines.



Year 6 Artwork: Flying machine collage using decorative papers



Year 6 Writing: Instructions on how to build a flying machine

'Imagination Station gives us the chance to read a text and then respond in our writing and in our artwork. The illustrations in *The Pilot and the Little Prince* are very inspiring and clever, like when he flies over the land below and it's made up of lots of faces.'

Matty, Year 6

**Choral Speaking: lifting the text off the page**

Another way in which Horfield children explore texts creatively is through choral speaking. In its simplest form this is speaking text aloud in unison. Children use their voices and movement to create a polished performance, conducted by a lead adult. This is a highly effective form of immersive learning. During these performances children 'dive into the text,' use their voices to evoke atmosphere and add dramatic actions in order to lift the text off the page and take ownership of it. Children memorize the text not by rote but during the rehearsal process. Working with a small amount of text at such a detailed level enables children to broaden their vocabulary and to access ambitious challenging texts. They internalise the language, creating an inner memory bank of phrases to use in their own writing.

Children recognise that this transfers to classroom practice and gives them confidence when writing.

'Choral speaking inspires me to put new words in my writing.'

Harvey, Year 3

This fosters a desire to learn more, an increased confidence when tackling challenging texts and a heightened understanding of the author's hidden messages. This is particularly important for our disadvantaged pupils who generally, have a more limited vocabulary. Because the barriers have been removed between them and the text they **become** the text. Highly polished performances such as these are enthusiastically attended by parents of children from Reception to Year 6.

'Choral Speaking lets me imagine that I am inside the text.'

Sophie, Year 4

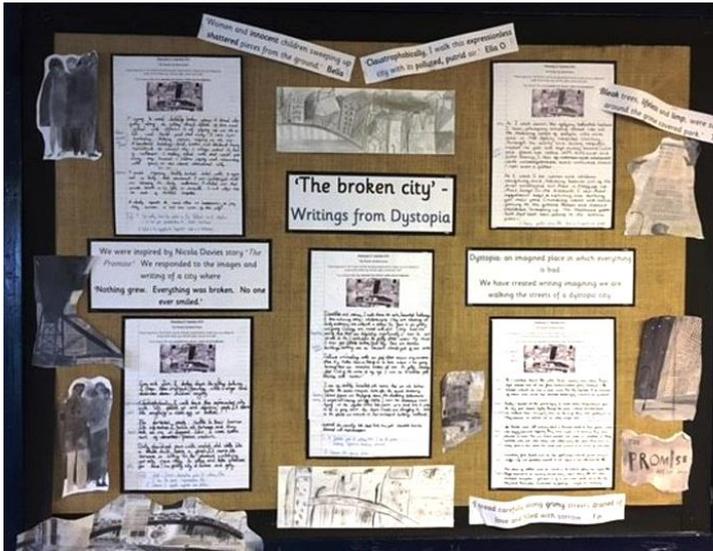
**Immersive Pedagogy**

Kirsty Jones, a Year 5 teacher at Horfield, chose to study *The Promise* (Davies 2014) with her class. This was one of the books selected by the school because of its link to the Seeds and New Life metaphor. Kirsty was excited by the opportunity to develop immersive memorable lessons inspired by the powerful themes explored in the book. Kirsty's passion for high quality literature is evident in her planning, delivery and in the outcomes of her lessons. It is important to note that teachers don't choose a book just because it has a direct link with the metaphor: they would rather explore the metaphor through different avenues than choose a 'mediocre' text.



**Year 5 Choral Speaking Performance: *The Promise***

The illustrations in 'The Promise' were closely examined by the class and children paid particular attention to the body language of the characters. They noticed that the way in which the characters are portrayed by the artist changes throughout the text. Class discussions centred on how the change in the characters' portrayal relates to the seeds being planted and growing throughout the city. To explore this further, children created their own freeze-frames of the characters at the beginning and end of the text. This approach was chosen because of the opportunities for learning to be active, fun, explorative (body language etc.) and because this method initiated a practical understanding of the text.



**Year 5 Displayed Work: Writings from Dystopia inspired by *The Promise***

Additional lessons focused on 'Writings from Dystopia.' The children imagined that they were walking the streets of a dystopic city where... 'Nothing grew. Everything was broken. No one ever smiled.' They used the image of the city and described an imaginary journey through it using powerful phrases of their own creation.

The children also studied the writer's use of figurative language in order to fully understand the effect that this has upon the reader.

### UKLA Literacy School of the Year 2017

Our involvement with the UKLA Book Awards has been transformative. The Bristol Book Group of primary teacher judges who came together under Trish Dodds' leadership was inspired by the experience of working collaboratively. They decided to continue on their mission to raise the profile of books and children's response to their reading by establishing the Bristol Book Awards. This has become an annual event and disseminates teachers' creative practice and children's responses to high quality texts within Bristol primary schools.



The impact of our practice at Horfield has been validated by the UKLA judges who visited all of our classrooms and declared that, 'The quality of the writing is a joy to behold.' If our children are to develop culturally and spiritually it is essential that learning engages their hearts and minds and becomes irresistible. Making learning meaningful and memorable is fundamental to all that we do at Horfield.

**As Nathan in Year 6 commented, 'These are the threads which are woven through the curriculum so that a unique and rich tapestry is created.'**

### Children's Books

- Anholt, L. (2006, illus. Sheila Moxley) *Stone Girl Bone Girl: The Story of Mary Anning of Lyme Regis*. ISBN 1845077008.
- Aston, D. (2014, illus. Sylvia Long) *A Seed is Sleepy*. Chronicle Books. ISBN 9781452131474.
- Davies, N. (2014, illus. Laura Carlin) *The Promise*. Walker Books. ISBN 9781406355598.
- Doherty, B. (2017, illus. Alexandria Neonakis) *Blue John*. Barrington Stoke. ISBN 9781781125786.
- Sis, P. (2014) *The Pilot and the Little Prince*. Pushkin Children's Books. ISBN 9781782690597.
- Wilde, O. (1888, illus. Lisbeth Zwerger, 1984) *The Selfish Giant*. ISBN 0907234305.