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Foundation

Teacher Development Fund

Embedding learning through the
arts in the primary curriculum

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

Case study

Hotspur Primary School, Concordia
Location: Newcastle, England

This study looks at how a primary school with a predisposition to embedding learning through the arts in the curriculum used this approach to help improve pupils' wellbeing, create a whole-school culture and ethos, and support students experiencing disadvantage.



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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

The case study below focuses on the way Hotspur Primary School connected the arts and each pupil's emotional development and wellbeing to develop confidence and resilience and enable highly differentiated choices about how to engage pupils experiencing disadvantage with the arts in response to individual needs.

Hotspur Primary School – Concordia



Pupils from across participating schools take part in Concordia Festival.
Photo: Stephen Beecroft.

School background and context

Hotspur Primary School is a local authority-maintained primary school in Newcastle. It has around 420 pupils, aged 3–11, on the roll. Just over 30% are eligible for free school meals, above the national average of 25%. It has a below-average number of pupils with a statement of special educational needs (0.2% compared to a national average of 2.9%) and of pupils with English as an additional language (9.5% compared to a national average of 20.8%). The school serves an area that is majority white British and is a mix of working and middle class. The school was rated Good by Ofsted at its last inspection in January 2018.

Since the current head teacher took over, the school has been gradually building an environment in which children (and teachers) are routinely exposed to and immersed in the arts in general. The school's involvement in the TDF represents an extension of a broader trend in which children's learning experiences are frequently, possibly even routinely, contextualised in one or more of the arts. This case study explores the approach that has been taken to embedding learning through the arts that builds on this long-term trajectory. It focuses in particular on the contributions of the Concordia project for embedding learning through singing in the school curriculum.

Overview of the Teacher Development Fund project

Hotspur Primary School took part in the Concordia vocal leadership programme during the TDF pilot. The school's head teacher was also the leader of the Concordia project. The project aimed to transform the environments of the participating schools by instilling a love of singing among teachers and pupils, and by equipping them with the technical skills to engage in singing to high standards and in multiple contexts. It was a project encompassing an intraschool and interschool community within the Ouseburn Valley area where all participating schools are located. The intention was to achieve this through continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) for teachers, through which they could develop the skills and confidence to lead singing with their pupils in school assemblies, choirs, after-school projects and lessons. This would make more visible the shift in whole-school ethos towards making singing for pleasure a routine part of people's lives.

The CPDL organised via the Concordia vocal leadership project was conducted over two years, with a significant shift in approach for the second year. In the first year, participating teachers and school leaders took part in intense weekend workshops led by experts from the organisation Sing For Pleasure.

Case study: Hotspur Primary School

These workshops explored:

- singing
- teaching and conducting singing in choral groups
- making use of singing in an educational context
- leading children in singing

The vocal leaders from Sing For Pleasure also introduced participants to resources, including texts, which could support them in using singing for specific goals. This included learning goals, such as building a repertoire of songs which have relevance to various subjects and age groups.

Finally, the CPDL included a supportive component of further day courses, twilight sessions and performances to provide a clear structure and an end goal for everyone taking part, including the children.

In the second year, the emphasis shifted from drawing singing into the work of core participants towards embedding it into their routine practice and promoting singing for pleasure across the school. This shift was underpinned by a change in the content, though the overall model of delivery echoed the first year's structure: a spread of five days of dedicated workshops supported by other courses and sessions, supplemented with texts and other materials to help participants develop a more expansive repertoire.

A key part of the progress made in the second year was in helping participants become more conscious of the ways in which regularly singing for pleasure was beneficial for teachers and children and the shift in whole-school ethos which this could achieve.

Evidence for this report was gathered through:

- an interview with the head teacher of Hotspur Primary School
- a focus group discussion with a number of Key Stage 2 pupils at the school
- a focus group discussion with a cross section of staff who have been involved in singing at Hotspur Primary School in a variety of capacities
- exploration of documentary analysis relating to the school's approach to singing

Professional learning environment

Teachers as professional learners in learning through the arts

The school's approach to professional learning in the arts is organic and implicit. Colleagues' responses to questions during our study visit tended to focus more on the outputs and outcomes, and on providing diverse opportunities for pupils to be exposed to the arts, than on the processes, systems and structures developed through CPDL to enable this. However, on probing more deeply, we found evidence of a sophisticated environment for ensuring that the staff at Hotspur Primary School concentrated on making use of the arts in their teaching practices and reflected on how to improve it and build on the learning gained through CPDL support.

A key component of the school's push to provide arts experiences to its pupils effectively is its long-standing policy of appointing highly-skilled members of staff with a disposition to see CPDL in the arts as a core part of their skills and responsibilities. Many teachers hired by the school have arts qualifications and/or experience as artist practitioners, and the school's hiring process aims to determine the extent to which new members of staff will fit into and contribute to its ethos. For example, one colleague talked about asking interviewees to participate in a group singing activity to determine their willingness to take part.

Case study: Hotspur Primary School

This focus on driving standards through recruitment and ensuring that all colleagues are going to be driven, effective and collaborative, and see the arts as important to the progress of pupils, has other ramifications for professional learning. The head teacher and focus group consulted for this case study both emphasised the extent to which teachers seek out new information and guidance. To borrow a phrase from a colleague at the school, teacher learning happens “frequently, but in a diffuse way”. The general feeling is that colleagues are expected to take responsibility for their own professional learning. They are supported by the school and their peers and by accessing in-depth specialist expertise, such as that available through the TDF Concordia project. One colleague said that they had learned more about the arts in their two years’ working at the school than during their entire PGCE.

The leadership team feels that while this approach has reaped a number of benefits, it is somewhat lacking in terms of sustainability, and leaves them dependent on the right opportunities emerging naturally. The school is working to address this, and projects such as the TDF, with its expansion into a second year with focus on embedding learning into teachers’ and leaders’ regular practice, represent a powerful opportunity to do so in a lasting way. In keeping with the school’s holistic and inclusive ethos around the arts, and in addition to its involvement in Concordia, other teachers have begun taking part in specific CPDL for making use of the arts.

The evidence the researchers have seen also suggests that, while the senior leadership team and individual teachers share a keen understanding of the importance of professional learning and of teachers seeking it out, the structures in place are focused either on teachers setting out to develop an area of their practice (a ‘bottom up’ model) or on senior leaders developing strategic priorities and projects for professional learning (a ‘top down’ model). The next step for building on the deep-rooted commitment to embedding learning through the arts, is to examine the ‘sides’ of the professional learning environment and to develop more powerful systems for middle leadership to shape and direct the CPDL that their departments access in response to emerging needs.

Focusing teacher learning on pupil achievement

We observed relatively limited direct evidence that teacher learning is explicitly linked to pupil achievement, but do not believe that this represents a significant gap in the professional learning environment. The school's planning revolves around its School Development Plan, which is built on a set of key outcomes for all learners. These include elements such as "all children will learn to read well"; "all children will make very good progress across the curriculum and attain highly"; and "all children will experience a curriculum that is relevant, challenging and stimulating". These outcomes then become the core, explicit and direct focus for designing projects, in the same way that prospective teachers joining the school have to sign up for the school's core values and approach. This and the school's emphasis on hiring high-quality, reflective practitioners, suggests that teachers do understand the importance of the connections between their professional learning experiences and the achievement of their pupils. It is the water they swim in rather than the product of a specific intervention. A good deal of evidence reinforced this during the in-depth and textured contributions of the Concordia project to exploring the needs of pupils experiencing disadvantage at the TDF Cohort Learning Days.

Use of specialist arts expertise

Much of the professional learning in the arts at the school has made strong use of diverse specialist expertise. The school has drawn on the experience of artists in constructing a wide range of mechanisms to support teachers. For example, it has brought in a percussionist and dancer to provide input on how the planning of the curriculum can be managed to provide meaningful and positive experiences with the arts for pupils. The TDF is a good, but more sustained and deeper, example of the kind of partnership with specialists that the school sees as essential for realising its vision for the arts.

Concordia provided a valuable example of this type of practice, with several benefits that might not have been available through another mechanism. Firstly, the project provided some colleagues at the school with access to a group of experienced vocal leader trainers, who had helped educators to become competent, confident singers in their own right, and to lead and teach singing. Moreover, the TDF's two-year duration and strong focus in the second year on embedding arts-based practices in the teachers' toolkit of approaches, enabled a level of depth in professional learning that schools can rarely access. The sustained and in-depth nature of the support, funding and partnership has contributed to the school's evolution to a point where singing and its benefits are woven into the fabric of daily life – so much so, that interviewees struggled to remember practice before the Concordia project.

The school also works to build and deepen connections with a broad range of experts from the local community, and to take advantage of local opportunities. The school puts a lot of thought and energy into determining how to make the best use of these opportunities, and goes out of its way to pursue arts-related projects relevant to its broader teaching and learning goals. Examples of this are taking part in a Heritage Lottery project through the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, working with the Cap-a-Pie drama group to develop a project for a whole year group, and working with art students at Northumbria University in a student tutor role.

Collaboration and peer support

Collaboration in one form or another is a critical element of the school's approach to arts-based learning and is a key skill for all teachers. In terms of arts-based activities, teachers are encouraged to reflect on where elements of learning in one activity can feed into others, and to develop whole-school projects through sharing and embedding practices across different year groups. Co-design work with cultural partners is also an important feature of the school's leadership of arts-based learning, and links into its use of specialist expertise, such as working with drama student tutors to ensure they have a good understanding of working with and teaching primary age children.

Interviews with staff indicated there is a strong culture of collaboration across the school and there is evidence that this is brought into being by colleagues and encouraged by leaders with equal effectiveness. Individuals are encouraged to explore and diffuse new ideas, to share ideas that worked well with one-year group with another, and trying activities with the same group later on to observe how things have changed. Again, the TDF has provided a valuable opportunity in this regard. The horizontal model of professional learning employed through the Concordia project, combined with its extended duration, created a community of practice focused on singing and teaching singing that has had the opportunity to work over a long time with colleagues within and beyond the school.

Teaching and learning through the arts

Teaching and learning approaches and strategies for learning through the arts

The school's approach to ensuring its teaching and learning is strong and continues to improve relies on ensuring that the quality of teaching staff remains high, and that their attitude to teaching and learning is cohesive. This is reinforced by the senior leadership team's approach to strategic goal setting, which is heavily outcomes-orientated. As a result of this environment, few detailed, centrally-defined teaching approaches are in place at the school. Instead, the approach to teaching and learning is generally deferred to individual teachers, with the school's senior leadership believing the best approach is to place trust in the professionals they recruit, and the system they use to do so.



Teacher CPD session explores how to use singing to support teaching and learning. Photo: Stephen Beecroft.

However, coherent approaches to teaching and learning that are specifically related to the arts do exist. These contribute to school life through the school's diverse professional learning, student support and arts development approaches. For example, Hotspur is a Thrive school, and the arts are a key part of delivering the Thrive approach to nurturing pupil mental wellbeing – such as using the arts to develop children's stress-regulation systems by offering them alternative ways to express themselves and manage their emotions. The arts can also offer 'over-adapters' (pupils who have a gap in their emotional development and find it difficult to say when they need help) ways to express their needs and feelings.

Strategies for overcoming barriers to learning

For teachers, a critical aspect of how to overcome barriers to learning is in using the arts to enhance pupils' confidence and wellbeing – which, they feel, then translates into improvements in academic achievement. The school's investment in and development of the Thrive approach plays a big part in this. Thrive is an intervention that aims to support children and their families to overcome emotional challenges. It outlines five ways of grouping pupils facing difficulties as differentiated by the:

- needs of the pupils
- skills required to address these needs
- the dominant metaphor used to describe the needs
- resources required to meet them

The Concordia project within the TDF provides a useful example of this principle in action, and demonstrates the systematic approach to implementation that the school has developed. While the emphasis on singing as a whole-school enterprise does not necessarily have a specific focus on children experiencing disadvantage, identifying barriers to learning for such pupils has been cited as a priority throughout the pilot by those taking part. Much of the positive reporting emerging from the project has emphasised the value of this element and provided a good deal of detail about how the project has worked for pupils experiencing disadvantage. Moreover, much of the value of the singing project, according to participants, has been in giving these children well-supported access to quality singing material and the means to become adept at it themselves.

Quality arts experiences for learners experiencing disadvantage

Hotspur's socio-economically diverse intake means that developing high-quality provision for learners experiencing disadvantage is a high priority, and the arts play a key role. The head teacher said that the school has long had a reputation for cultural activity, but he felt when he arrived in post that the quality and consistency of this provision could be improved. As a result, the school has worked to give all pupils the opportunity to access high-quality arts experiences. This is embodied in the Hotspur Entitlement, which outlines the specific opportunities and experiences of each pupil during their time at the school. This includes attending and taking part in music and drama performances, and working with arts specialists.

Leading and embedding learning through the arts

School vision and values

The Hotspur School Development Plan is built on the foundation of the vision for arts and cultural learning of the Ouseburn Learning Trust, to offer all pupils “authentic arts and cultural experiential learning”. The plan comprises seven strategic outcomes, which aim to support holistic education and ensure pupils know what they need for assessments. The seven outcomes are linked to the provision of learning through the arts, as follows:

- All children will be happy and safe at school. The arts play a crucial role in supporting the wellbeing of the community, particularly through the Thrive programme.
- All children will learn to read well, supported by the school’s Core Canon to engage in quality literature.
- All children will make very good progress across the curriculum and attain highly. This includes investment in the arts to support learning in core curriculum subjects, and in learning in the arts itself.
- All children will experience a curriculum that is relevant, challenging and stimulating, enriched and inspired by a wide range of arts and cultural activity.

- Children will display Hotspur’s Core Values in their everyday behaviour. The school develops effective ways of exploring values through the arts. A recent example is a project centred around composing protest songs in celebration of the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King’s visit to Newcastle, which was linked to topic learning around racism and other forms of discrimination.
- All members of staff will have equally high expectations of each other and all children, including in learning through the arts.
- The building, site, finances and all resources will be effectively and efficiently utilised, including support from specialist partners, staff and arts and cultural collaborators.

Teacher leadership and ownership of learning through the arts

Leadership in the arts is cited as a strong feature of the school. This is exemplified in how the school constructs its School Development Plan, beginning with a two-hour brainstorming process. It is then reviewed during team meetings throughout the year. The head teacher is also keen for the plan not to act as a ‘manual’ for teachers, and to allow them a high degree of autonomy, particularly with arts-based learning.

Along with teacher leadership, the school also prioritises opportunities for pupils to teach leadership and ownership of learning through the arts, in order to inspire and engage each other. As one teacher said, “children love listening to other children”. The Picture of the Week project is one example of this, with pupils from all years having the chance to champion their favourite painting, as was the all-boys dance group, which teachers felt had been influential in pupils inspiring each other to “give it a go”.

Embedding learning through the arts in the curriculum

The arts are embedded in the school curriculum in terms of what is explicitly taught in the classroom, its extra-curricular provision and the wider ethos and life of the school community. Strategic outcomes three and four in the School Development Plan specifically address this, supported by the system of dividing curriculum areas between 'learning teams' of teachers who are responsible for reflecting on and developing learning in their area, including for the arts, global learning, maths, English and the environment.

This approach plays out in the school's holistic model of teaching and learning, where teachers are encouraged to reflect on where elements of learning in one activity could feed into another and to develop whole-school projects through sharing and embedding across different year groups. In terms of making connections between the arts and learning in core curriculum subjects, examples include an emphasis on visual learning in numeracy, using the Talk for Writing approach in literacy and using the arts as a 'hook' during science week.

The school also draws connections between the arts and pupils' emotional development, including confidence and resilience. One pupil commented, "before I come to school in the morning, I feel tired and nervous about tests, [but] once you've started singing, you forget about everything else except for the song. It makes you feel happy and free." Another pupil said that, "When I'm struggling, I think of a song I really like. It helps me to focus a lot more if I sing it in my head."

When working with external arts specialists, the head teacher encourages them to look through examples of pupils' work and long-term planning so that projects can be designed around the learning that is going on in school. This is an element of the partnerships the head teacher is keen to develop further.

This use of specialists as direct contributors to models and developing supportive materials provided to teachers was observable within activities related to the TDF at the school. One of the successes of the project was the collaborative creation of a range of materials designed for those taking part in Sing For Pleasure activities. These included a number of collections of singing repertoires that are now held in the participating schools.

Understanding disadvantage and learning through the arts

The Hotspur Entitlement is key to how the school supports access to and progress in the arts for learners experiencing disadvantage, in particular for its above average number of pupils eligible for free school meals, some of whom have limited life experiences. Teachers find opportunities for pupils' home lives to connect to the arts – for example, Take One Object, where families were invited to visit the museum along with pupils to view their focus object and to "take art down from its pedestal". The Picture of the Week scheme gave pupils the opportunity to learn about and champion their favourite art, making it something all learners could participate in and experiment with.



Pupils perform at Sage Gateshead.
Photo: Stephen Beecroft.

Systems for monitoring and evaluating impact of learning through the arts

The school has an Arts Learning Team, formed of governors and members of staff, who are responsible for auditing and developing the provision of arts-based learning in the school. Their responsibilities include assessing the current level of arts expertise among staff, arts coverage and pupil achievement across the curriculum, and deciding on which art forms will be the focus in the coming year.

The school also carries out systematic impact assessments to ensure the reach of arts-based learning is being extended to vulnerable learners and pupils from less affluent backgrounds.

Making connections

Partnerships with arts and cultural organisations

Hotspur has built up partnerships with a range of arts and cultural organisations in ongoing projects and on an ad hoc basis. In 2017–18, this included working with:

- music organisations, such as Sage Gateshead, Northern Chords Festival, Newcastle University Music Department, Music Partnership North, Scottish Opera, the Royal Opera House and the Concordia Vocal Project
- galleries and museums, such as the Laing Art Gallery, the Baltic Contemporary Art Gallery, Great North Museum: Hancock, the Discovery Museum and Seven Stories
- working with drama and theatre companies, such as Cap-a-Pie Theatre, Northern Stage, Northumbria University Drama Department, the Shakespeare in Schools Festival and the Unfolding Theatre Company
- dance companies, such as Dance City and Hexham Morris Dance Team
- film organisations, including TURPS Film, the Newcastle International Film Festival and Tyneside Cinema

These partnerships also operate both ways, with members of staff contributing to local arts and cultural learning, including the Arts Learning Team Leader, who is a board member for Cap-a-Pie Theatre, and the head teacher, who participates as a member of the Music Partnership North's Strategic Governance Board and the Culture Bridge North East Board.

A key priority for the school is increasing the extent to which it co-constructs and co-designs programmes with partner organisations – something they have started to develop in their ongoing relationship with drama students from Northumbria University and students taking the Sage Gateshead community music degree. Where the universities would come to the school with projects, the school will now go to the universities with ideas for activities or programmes.

Home, community and parental engagement in learning

Arts and cultural learning within the Ouseburn Learning Trust, of which the school is part, is explicitly shaped by its context in Newcastle Upon Tyne. As such, Hotspur makes deliberate efforts to support pupils from all backgrounds to connect with the city's cultural heritage – and for them to feel they are contributing to this – and with their learning in school. For the school, a significant part of this is engaging parents in their children's learning. For example, it set up a community art gallery in the school hall for pupils to exhibit their work for families to visit. This was further explored through Take One Object with the Great North Museum: Hancock and West Jesmond School, where the schools organised an opportunity for pupils and their families to visit 'their' object during half term. The head teacher said that for some families this would have been a daunting prospect without the structure and support of the school, remarking that one parent "couldn't believe it was free [to enter]".

Where next?

Hotspur's approach to supporting teaching and learning through the arts is based, at its core, on a process of continually seeking out new opportunities to explore these approaches, and there is little reason to believe that this model is likely to change dramatically in the future. However, the school has identified some specific projects that it would like to develop further:

- **Picture of the Week:** This has captured imaginations and provided opportunities for pupils to explore diverse ideas and proposals, and the plan is to pursue it further, but to review in a few years which specific aspects should be preserved and where there are opportunities to freshen things up.
- **Digital Literacy:** Thanks to the school's involvement in the TDF they have begun to forge links with other arts-based CPDL initiatives, in particular the Full Steam Ahead project in Northern Ireland. Colleagues from Into Film and Hotspur Primary School conduct visits to each other's 'patch' and swap and develop ideas. There are also plans for colleagues from Into Film to do specific CPDL work with teachers at Hotspur.



Pupils from across schools taking part in Concordia come together for a performance. Photo: Stephen Beecroft.

Further reading

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

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

Case study: Heathfield Primary School, Art of Learning (South Ayrshire, Scotland)

This study examines the role of school leaders in using Art of Learning based approaches to extend and enhance the curriculum, to develop pupils' executive function and to encourage creativity and collaboration. The full case study is at phf.org.uk/TDF/Heathfield.

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

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

Teacher Development Fund: Year one pilot evaluation

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

Teacher Development Fund pilot programme 2016–18 evaluation

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

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

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

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