

# Young People Writing

**A THREE YEAR LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH  
EVALUATION OF *THE MINISTRY OF STORIES***

**THE UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION  
Interim Report for Year 1: a summary for teachers**



## **Background to the Ministry of Stories**

The Ministry of Stories was founded by Nick Hornby, Lucy MacNab and Ben Payne in 2010. The MoD is a creative writing and mentoring centre situated in East London for young people aged between 8 and 18 years of age. The centre's approach is built on the premise that writing has the power to unleash imagination, to build confidence and self-respect, and to develop communication skills. The centre provides a range of clubs that young people attend voluntarily. Four core objectives underpin the ethos of the Ministry of Stories, and these are also the focus of the research project:

1. to increase young people's motivation to write and their love of writing;
2. to improve their creativity in writing;
3. to improve their attainment in writing;
4. to improve their broader expressive and communication skills.

## **The research project**

The MoS have engaged the D|A|R|E Centre at the Institute of Education to conduct a three-year study of the impact of the MoS on young people and their writing. The study has two strands: a study over time of a sample of young people and their writing in the after-school clubs; and a series of case studies of individual; short project organised in collaborations with schools, colleges and community organisations.

## **Interim Report for Year 1**

### **Motivation to write**

The young people consistently professed their enjoyment of writing at the MoS and all felt their writing had improved during the time they had been attending clubs. The end of year one interviews revealed that their perception of the writing process in many cases remained dominated by school discourses focusing on statutory elements of the school curriculum and its assessment. Nevertheless, in some cases an appreciation of more profound creative processes was evident, emphasising the performative aspects of writing and that it was often most effective when it moved beyond writing into other modes such as visual design, singing and dancing. The young people were also developing an understanding of their preferred writing environment, with a clear emphasis on the stimulating environment offered by MOS, by contrast with (in some cases) schools and homes. They also emphasised the kindness, attentiveness and openness of the MoS staff and mentors.

### **Creativity in Writing**

The creativity of the children's work was evaluated using a 'consensual tool' which required two people to discuss how the work had transformed cultural influences it drew on and created something new and valuable. This tool served as a template for discussion drawing on tutors' prior knowledge of the child's work and its context, and on analysis of the writing. It enables a complex, consensual judgment to be converted into a score. The sample writing showed a range of creative quality, which was not surprising in itself. More interesting was the processes that contributed to improvement in creative quality at MoS. These included the freedom offered to children to choose their own topics; the balance by MoS between a specialised focus on writing and the involvement of other expressive modes (drama, dance, song, drawing, media); the involvement of a wide range of

authentic contexts and practices, whether through the location of projects or through the use of professional writers as tutors and models. Another key feature was the freedom to draw on a wide range of cultural influences, whether literature, comics, soap operas or videogames.

We explored these influences in interviews, testing the assumption that what young people read would influence what they write. Unsurprisingly, the influences from print literature range from popular class readers (such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*) to bestseller children's fiction (the *Harry Potter* and *Beast Quest* series). Equally unsurprisingly, fictional narrative in television, film and videogame appears to be as important a source of imaginative ideas as books. From whatever source they come, these influences raise familiar questions about creativity, in particular the ways in which something new and original is created by transforming existing material. The openness of the MoS staff to this wide range of cultural experience, avoiding judgments about children's interests, was judged to be an important part of the success of the programme. The MoS creates strong connections, then, between reading (including media culture) and writing (including creative production in different media). The expansion of children's interests in reading, watching, playing and listening is as important an outcome of the programme as the expansion of their range of expressive activity.

### **Attainment in Writing**

The study makes no definitive judgement in relation to the first year of the project, as evaluation of attainment forms part of the longer-term work of the research. The objective here is to see whether sustained attendance at the MoS clubs has a measurable effect on writing attainment as judged in schools. However, work in one of the project case studies, which took place in a Year 7 classroom of a London Academy, suggested that (for a sample group of six pupils) the writing completed in the MoS project was at least at the same NC writing level as other work completed in English; and in some cases possibly better.

### **Expression and Communication**

The study found good evidence that the MoS improved young people's expressive and communicative abilities in different ways. In some cases this was a consequence of gains in confidence, in children who had been bullied or shy. It was also a consequence of the highly collaborative approach to creative work, featuring sensitive guidance by group leaders and supportive peer exchanges. Mentors also felt it was a natural consequence of the sustained respect in MoS's ethos for young people, their interests, beliefs and ideas.

### **Ideas for the Future**

The study concluded by suggesting further ways to build on the MoS's success. These included: exploring further the range of cultural influences on young people's writing; developing further the range of other expressive modes and media in play, especially digital media; and exploring ways to support bilingual/biliterate young people.

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