

Young People Writing

A three year longitudinal research evaluation of *The Ministry of Stories (MoS)*

The Institute of Education (IOE), University of London

Interim Report for Year 2: a summary for teachers



MINISTRY OF STORIES



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. The study has completed two years, and is currently in its third year. A summary for teachers for Year 1 is available from the MoS. The study has followed 15 young people through the second year, 9 of whom have continued from Year 1. In general terms, the MoS was found to be thriving and successful during Year 2, with all three out-of-school clubs full, with waiting lists of young people eager to join. The study also looks at selected special projects run by MoS in collaboration with schools and community groups. This year's report included case studies of three projects: writing for videogames, with The Roundhouse; Letter-writing to real pen-friends; and Planting Poetry, a primary school poetry-writing project.

Interim Report for Year 2

Motivation to write

The young people continued to express their enjoyment of writing at the MoS. Key factors here were ownership of the environment, freedom of choice over their writing and the topics they followed, encouraging purposeful talk along with listening, and a greater emphasis on sharing of work across the groups. These young people also appreciated the emphasis on creative experimentation rather than excessive emphasis on technical correctness at too early a stage, which encouraged redrafting, productive risk-taking and self-expression. Many of them felt that their writing at MoS had supported their writing in school. One boy said:

“Going to the Ministry of Stories has actually changed my levels at school as well, it's moved my levels up and it's really inspired me to write more stories”.

They also appreciated specific aspects of the MoS environment: that it was fun, that they would meet friends there, and that they would enjoy a concentration of adult attention.

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, as in Year 1; but also a general increase in the levels of creativity in this measure, with no participant scoring 'little creativity' and more scoring 'strong creativity'. Possible contributory factors were increased confidence with technical aspects of writing, and the approach taken in the workshops.

As in Year 1, the young people's writing was influenced by their reading, as well as their wider media consumption. Reading included a range of popular fiction, from the Spiderwick Chronicles to the Beastquest series and its multimedia franchise. Children's Laureate Malory Blackman also featured, while in the media category popular shooting games such as the Call of duty series were in evidence. As in Year 1, an important aspect of the creative writing environment remained a positive, encouraging, non-judgmental attitude to the young people's cultural experience and preference. At the same time, there was some evidence of the young writers becoming less dependent on sources from their reading, and more confident in expressing new ideas and exploring their own lives directly.

Attainment in Writing

A comparison was made between the 15 case study children (CSCh) who had taken part in Ministry of Stories, and 106 of their peers, using end of year reading and writing attainment data from their schools. The positive finding of this analysis was a statistically significant improvement in progression in writing attainment for those children who had attended the MoS workshops. Furthermore, this improvement was evident in children at both the lower and higher end of the achievement spectrum, when compared to their peers who had not attended MoS.

Expression and Communication

In general, the study found that, as in Year 1, the MoS experience developed young people's ability to express themselves in written and spoken form. A new theme in Year 2, however, was a greater ability to talk about their work and reflect on it, as well as more sustained ability to discuss and listen in group sessions. This reflected a change in the approach to the workshops, which consistently encouraged these skills. The other important factor in developing skills of communication was the mentors. The sustained opportunity to talk about their work with sympathetic adults is a core feature of the MoS approach, and it is clear that it is critical to the development of speaking, listening and writing skills. Where MoS had collaborated with schools, the picture this year was of effective collaboration between workshop leaders, mentors and teachers, all working together to plan the project and engage with the learning and creative process.

Ideas for the Future

The study concluded by suggesting further ways to build on the MoS's success. These included: involving mentors in the continuing exploration of the nature of creativity and how it is conceived and promoted; developing the range of pedagogies, and the balance between structured and self-led approaches; exploring opportunities for bilingual writing.

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