



THE UK'S THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

Reflections and Future Opportunities

Feedback and Impact

Developing Creative Practice in Schools

Funded tickets

Research & Development Projects

Welcome

UNICORN THEATRE CREATIVE HUB

CREATIVE SCHOOLS
IMPACT REPORT:
2021-2026

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FOREWORD

We are delighted to share this report which celebrates the impact of our in-depth work with local schools.

Launched in 2021, our Creative Hub responds directly to the need for children to engage with culture and the Unicorn's need to better understand the young people for whom we make work. Nobody knows what it's like to be young today better than children themselves and so our work engages directly with them, bringing children, artists and creative practice together to explore their experiences of the world together. It is an absolutely vital part of our approach to making theatre for young audiences; schools' engagement with this work is vital, not only for the ecosystem of the Unicorn but for the future of theatre itself.

Our Creative Schools Partnerships brings our creative practice directly into schools, working not only with children but also those who work with children, advocating for a culture of creativity and for opening pathways to imagination and play. At a time when Arts

Subjects are under threat and the presence of Drama in Primary schools is woefully low, this programme proves that successful investment in Arts education requires investment in the teachers who determine that success. By providing educators with the skills, support, and infrastructure to nurture creative learning, the Unicorn ensures a legacy of impact with the Arts becoming part of a school's DNA. We are inspired by the schools in this report who have championed this work despite the immense pressures they face.

Crucially, this work promotes an inclusive education which meets children's wide range of learning styles. We have seen especially for children with barriers to learning, including those with SEND and EAL needs, teaching through Drama provides a unique platform for expression, curiosity and critical thinking, in turn developing self-confidence that traditional classroom methods sometimes fail to unlock. This report demonstrates that when we invest in Arts Subjects, we are not distracting from literacy and numeracy; rather, we are building the foundations of oracy, vocabulary, and self-expression which can in turn bridge the gap between disadvantage and opportunity.

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The Creative Schools Partnership Programme is not a peripheral enrichment activity; it is a deep, multi-year commitment to local schools, equipping and empowering the creative citizens of the future. Providing over 3,000 fully funded tickets and facilitating 18 Research and Development (R&D) projects has done more than just expose children to theatre; it has positioned them as experts and collaborators in the creative process. It has also had a significant impact on how we make work.

We are immensely proud of the work documented here, which strengthens and sharpens the creative work on the Unicorn's stages while fundamentally transforming the educational experiences for our local children.

Rachel Bagshaw and Rebekah Jones
Artistic Director and Executive Director
Unicorn Theatre



INTRODUCTION

The Unicorn Theatre is artist-led and child-centred, placing children at the heart of all its activity.

Creative Hub connects Unicorn artists and facilitators with children aged 0 – 13 years and together they develop Unicorn productions, influencing and shaping the work on our stages. We engage with children's unique perspective of the world, ensuring we remain relevant to our young audiences.

Central to our Creative Hub programme is Creative Schools, an in-depth multi-year partnership designed to connect local children, teachers and families with creative practice: in their classrooms; with theatre makers; and at our theatre in the heart of London. Reaching state Primary schools in our neighbouring boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Tower Hamlets, the programme aims to promote and enrich children's engagement with the arts and address the substantial imbalance of the arts in schools..

We believe that an arts-rich education can also have a significant impact on curriculum learning for all pupils, particularly those who face barriers to learning and can be a tool to address wider inequalities – it should be a right, not a luxury. This report shares our in-depth approach, highlights successes and identifies how we continue to develop this vital work with schools.

“Through engaging in opportunities for creative learning, grounded in subject knowledge and understanding, students’ creative capacity will be nurtured, and their personal, social and academic development greatly enriched.”

Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, 2019 (James et al., 2019)

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Launched as a pilot in autumn 2021, the programme received funding* in 2022 to continue as a free offer for two cohorts of local schools:

2021 - 2024

Friars Foundation Primary (Southwark)
Loughborough Primary (Lambeth)
Hermitage Primary (Tower Hamlets)

2023 - 2026

Snowsfields Primary (Southwark)
Oasis Academy South Bank (Lambeth)
Canon Barnett Primary (Tower Hamlets)

The partnerships feature two in-depth years of collaboration with a final year to ensure legacy and sustain creative practice beyond the partnership. We have carefully developed the programme over the past four years to offer the same depth of practice in all schools, whilst retaining flexibility to adjust to each school's individual needs and changing circumstances.

* Please see the end page for our funders



Each school partnership includes:

- Three **Research and Development projects** led by professional artists and facilitators which collaborate with pupils on the development of Unicorn Productions.
- Access to **free and highly subsidised tickets** for all pupils
- A day of **technical workshops at the Unicorn for Y5 or Y6 pupils** each year
- **Teacher CPD training** sessions, along with Toolkit Resource & planning support, for embedding Drama and Creativity into the core curriculum, led by a specialist Primary Drama Consultant.
- A **bespoke school drama strategy**, co-designed with teachers and SLT, to integrate drama within curriculum teaching across Early Years, Key Stage 1 and 2.

This report focusses on the activity and outcomes delivered with the first two sets of partnership schools. We are currently working with a third set which includes two specialist provisions as we continue to grow and extend the offer. We have been delighted with the outcomes we have achieved together and are grateful for each school's commitment to the journey.



RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

At the heart of the Unicorn is collaboration with our young audiences. Through Creative Hub Research & Development (R&D) projects we connect children with professional artists to develop Unicorn productions, influencing and shaping the artistic programme, often resulting in first encounters for children as theatre makers. These projects take place over 5-6 weeks, delivered by a Unicorn facilitator in collaboration with our artists.

Creative Hub R&D projects bring children's voices and unique perspective of the world into our creative process. Unicorn artists collaborate with children as experts, exploring specific enquiries together and ultimately informing the work on our stages. In-school R&D projects are carefully designed with three central objectives:

- 1) To explore a creative enquiry with an artist for the development of a production
- 2) To support the creative, collaborative and personal development of pupils, with a focus on those who experience barriers to learning.
- 3) To enrich creative learning opportunities and support curriculum learning where appropriate.

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During their partnerships each school has taken part in three R&D projects with artists, contributing to the development of 18 productions. These R&D projects were:

- ***The Odyssey***, discovering which themes of this epic story resonated most with Y5 children on the cusp of independence. This production was on the Unicorn stage in spring 2024.
- ***Odd & the Frost Giants***, during which we worked on an adaptation of this story with writer Rob Evans. We looked at themes of family, adventure and independent journeys. We also explored Norse mythology and set design, with children learning about the design process and creating model boxes of their visions for the set design. This production was on the Unicorn stage in autumn 2024.
- ***The Big Drawing Adventure***, with A-Line Arts in which we explored how children can collaborate 'live' to create large works of art for a potential new performance piece and the importance of teamwork and respect.
- ***The Mess***, exploring emotional understanding and regulation with young children. Unicorn Associate Director Rachel Bagshaw (now Artistic Director), along with writer Annie Siddons and designer Sadeysa Greenaway-Bailey used play and clowning to explore a potential new production about untangling the mess inside our heads.
- ***Digital Greek Myths***, with Rachel Bagshaw (now Artistic Director) and Deanna Rodger. Exploring the themes of three Greek myths and the use of a chorus to inform the development of the Chorus and narration for a piece of digital theatre released in 2022 and available on our YouTube channel.
- ***The Magic Finger***, a collaboration with Roald Dahl Story Company. Discovering which themes of this story resonated most with children to inform the development of a PSHE focussed classroom resource for teachers. This [digital theatrical reading](#) and the resource is available on the Unicorn website.



- **Mountains**, exploring an early R&D piece about how people can communicate with one other across cultural and linguistic differences.
- **Medusa**, with writer Sophie Woolley, where we explored themes of adventure, core values and self-confidence.
- **I Wish**, a play developed with Le Gateau Chocolat received two projects. At early R&D stage children explored stereotypes, identity and what it means to make a wish – with their ideas and activities informing an R&D process with the company. In the second project Children co-designed the accompanying resources for KS1 which explored activism and the power of collective and meaningful wishes. This production was staged in spring 2024.
- **Beegu**, with Debbie Hannan, during which we explored themes of being different, feeling lost, and how we might welcome someone new to our city or school. These children also provided the Director with feedback during the rehearsal process. Beegu was staged in spring 2025.
- A project with KS1 children exploring how to have responsible and age-appropriate conversations about Climate Change, informing upcoming work with a range of artists. This child-led process explored how they connect with and look after the natural world around them, using storytelling and puppetry to share their work.
- **Pocket Money**, a new play about money, during which we discovered KS2-aged children's understanding of money, the financial world and the impact of making choices with money. The production will be on our stage in Autumn 2026.
- An early R&D for **The Last Wild**, exploring themes of science fiction, dystopia, climate and wildlife extinction, and children's responses to the characters for our upcoming adaptation of this story on our stage in Spring 2026.
- A *Children as Artists* project alongside **Anansi** exploring how to adapt a myth for stage, with advice from writer Justin Audibert children created their own mythical stories. Children watched the revival of *Anansi* in 2025.

- ***Creatures***, with Jo Tyabji exploring young children's understanding of animal habitats and migration patterns. Children explored the characterisation of coral and their response to the possibility, and reality, of wildlife extinction, for an upcoming new production due to be staged in 2026.
- ***How does Santa Go Down the Chimney?***, a very serious investigation set by director Paul Hunter with children discovering exactly how Santa gets into people's houses. These children also provided the Director with feedback during the R&D and rehearsal process. This production was staged in winter 2025.

- A series of projects with Autistic pupils and their teachers in a specialist resource base at one partner school. We explored how to develop our Access offer at the Unicorn and co-designed a resource to accompany all Sensory Adapted performances.



Feedback from all these collaborations across Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 were overwhelmingly positive. This work has had a significant impact on our creative process and all the Unicorn artists agreeing that R&D time with children had informed and enhanced their creative process.

“The workshops were great for being surrounded by the target audience and understanding their lives.”

Artist on a Unicorn R&D Schools project, autumn 2022

“I found the sessions incredibly useful, as a way to explore how the young people responded to the story... The sessions also provided a useful frame for the writer and I to discuss our own discoveries around the material - and we ended the session with a clear shared vision for the production, as I go into writing the first draft.”

Artist on a Unicorn R&D Schools project, autumn 2022

“I remembered how much I love making experiences for tiny children again! And I witnessed children on the cusp of the shift from observation being the primary collaborative tool, to being able to be generative as well as responsive.”

Artist on a Unicorn R&D Schools project, spring 2025



Selection of children's feedback
on Schools R&D projects.

*"I learnt being confident to
stand at the front of the class"*

*"I learnt to listen and respect
people's thoughts and ideas"*

*"I liked working in groups and making
freeze frames because it was fun"*

"It lets me let out my creativity"

*"I learnt a new game and how
to listen to other opinions"*

"I like sharing my ideas"



School teachers observed improved core skills in their pupils, as well as developing their individual creativity (see 'Feedback & Impact').

"We loved the project. We saw a boost in children's confidence; particularly those who were reticent to even introduce themselves in the first session. I think all the children felt really successful, which gave them a sense of achievement. When I look at their feedback forms I can see that they feel more confident expressing themselves and working alongside their peers. The children really enjoyed their sessions and the [Unicorn] team were great at allowing them to express themselves but also keeping them on task. We now play some of the warm up activities in class as the children enjoyed them so much."

KS1 teacher

"I think the children gained in confidence and were able to discuss and think about what it means to share ideas and work as part of a team. The children are better equipped to work collaboratively... and have become more confident. It gave me some new ideas to ways of working collaboratively, ways of engaging in lesson starter activities."

KS2 teacher



FOCUS PUPILS

As part of every R&D project, teachers identify three 'focus' pupils who experience barriers to learning. This ranges from pupils with SEND or EAL need, to those identified as having behavioural or emotional wellbeing needs. Our facilitators find moments to specifically support these focus pupils and teachers feedback on their engagement with curriculum learning, confidence and interpersonal skills.

"As a teacher it inspired my teaching and reinvigorated my love of the creative teaching of the curriculum for my Autistic pupils. It reminded me of why I love teaching."

Autism Base teacher

"With the SEND pupil, I realised that if I stop putting a pencil in his hand and allowed him to talk, he could engage with the learning just as well as the other pupils – he was so engaged and made so much progress!"

KS1 teacher

"I think the oracy benefit for focus children was amazing! The children in our school need more help with putting sentences/phrases together accurately and the repetition within games was really good for their oracy skills and will then help with their written English. I also saw their confidence develop and their independence."

KS1 teacher

"We observed three focus children and noticed how their confidence had grown over the sessions. They are now much more likely to put their hands up in class and share their ideas unprompted. A was more able to maintain focus for a whole session as the project went on and O and Z were able to take part both verbally and when working creatively in groups, which they had been reticent to do at the beginning of the project. It was lovely to see all the children expressing themselves so creatively and working collaboratively."

KS1 teacher

FUNDED TICKETS

All partner schools receive fully funded tickets for the first two years of the partnership, embedding a culture of theatre-going within the school. Children at Creative Partner Schools can expect to visit the theatre at least once and often more during the partnership. Over 3000 fully funded tickets were provided to partnership schools between 2021-2025, approximately 500 tickets per school.

To encourage theatre-going with families, partner schools promote our 'Local Tickets' scheme to their families. This enables families in Lambeth, Southwark and Tower Hamlets who face barriers to attending the theatre (such as the increasing cost of living) to bring their children to the theatre outside of school trips. Many of these families also sign their children up to attend free projects during school holidays, it has become part of our ecology and ensures that the work with schools ultimately feeds into engagement with all Creative Hub activity.

"We can't overstate the difference this makes to our families, particularly our most vulnerable families who are living in extreme poverty, challenging circumstances or who are working with children's services/social care."

Partner School Headteacher

"The partnership has made it possible for our families to attend theatre shows that were previously financially out of reach. As a result, children have gained valuable exposure to the arts and are now enthusiastically urging their families to join them in attending more shows."

Partner School SLT

“Since the start of the partnership, one of the biggest changes we’ve seen is in our pupil’s increased cultural capital- more of our children are regularly going to the theatre”

Partner School SLT

“Broadening our pupils’ experiences beyond the classroom at Snowfields has had a measurable impact on their confidence, communication, and aspirations. Many of our children come from some of the most disadvantaged backgrounds, with limited access to cultural experiences outside of school. Through [this] partnership...they’re exposed to new environments, language, and perspectives that enrich their understanding of the world and their place in it. In their end of year reports, many pupils named the Unicorn as one of the best parts of their year”

Partner School Headteacher



DEVELOPING DRAMA PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS

The ultimate goal of these partnerships is to promote Drama teaching within schools in a sustainable way with legacy beyond the partnership. Designed with Kate Hopewell our specialist Primary Drama Consultant, we do this through in-depth collaboration between Kate, teachers and the Senior Leadership Team. The outcome is a co-designed School Strategy for Drama which is crucial to ensure the legacy of this work.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD) SESSIONS

CPD was provided to all schools in Year 1 and Year 2 of the partnership with a focus on KS1 and KS2 teaching staff. These are often away-days at the Unicorn, mixing teachers from different partner schools, but can also be in-school twilight sessions and part of morning briefings. The CPD includes:

- Introduction to the 'Drama Toolkit' - designed to increase the use of drama throughout curriculum delivery. (See below)
- A guided creative learning journey for a typical fiction text appropriate to their Key Stage, with activities that explored narrative, character and world of the story.
- How creative activities meet their individual school's reporting and assessment requirements along with methods of meeting National Curriculum objectives – promoting Drama as a core teaching tool rather than solely an enrichment activity.
- A planning session that supports them to implement training immediately.

THE DRAMA TOOLKIT

Our Toolkit for using Drama and Creativity, is designed by Kate Hopewell, with 40 drama-based activities designed to be used across the curriculum.

Skill Focus: Specific activities for high-quality writing and oracy outcomes, scaffolded to meet all learning needs.

Resource Efficiency: Emphasis on low-cost, low-space activities to address budget hurdles.

Curriculum Alignment: Activities labelled with curriculum logos for quick navigation.

ONE TO ONE PLANNING SESSIONS

A crucial element of the partnership to ensure successful adoption are follow up planning sessions between our specialist Primary Drama consultant and each teacher. Teachers often leave CPD events feeling enthused and energised, but on returning to school are faced with the challenge of embedding creative learning activities in the packed curriculum. These sessions address this with individualised support and are offered throughout the partnership.

Teachers found the opportunity of working with peers from other schools “extremely valuable” as “those opportunities are very rare.”



CPD FEEDBACK

"I was so nervous about the day. I'm not a very confident person. It was so amazing though – if it had that impact on me, I can't wait to see what it does for my pupils"

KS2 teacher

"I love these activities! I've always done hot-seating and never really liked it – now I know how to do it in a way that will have everyone engaged and achieve the outcomes I've always wanted to achieve."

Artist on a Unicorn R&D Schools project autumn 2022

"It's amazing to see activities that don't need really expensive resources and such little set up and space. Our lack of budget and space has always been such a hurdle."

KS1 teacher



EMBEDDING DRAMA: CASE STUDIES

Adapting approaches to Literacy

CHALLENGE

Three of the participating schools wanted Literacy to be their creative focus. Two used Literacy Tree, a widely used book-based literacy programme with structured teaching methods - one school had been working with this for a while, and the other adopted it during our partnership following an Ofsted inspection. The third school did not have a pre-designed framework so had a little more freedom to adapt lessons.

ACTION

The Toolkit was reframed through a literacy lens. Activities were tailored with the school who were already reasonably confident with the Literacy framework. The other Literacy Tree school was introduced to the toolkit in their History unit and once teachers were confident using drama we were able to model how practice could effectively complement Literacy Tree work. With the third school we focussed on embedding Literacy across learning journeys.

OUTCOME

- Embedding drama-based toolkit activities proved thoroughly successful across all year groups, fitting neatly in the Literacy Tree plans and speaking to the learning outcomes mapped into planning.
- Using the drama toolkit enhanced support for the pupils, creatively enriching the learning journey and heightening the levels of emotional connection and subject-understanding.
- Teachers reported using different activities from the Toolkit that allowed pupils to access more of the Literacy curriculum without such writing heavy tasks; engaged more pupils in developing story-telling skills; and enabled the teachers to support different learning styles within a packed literacy curriculum.



Advanced Creative Practice

CHALLENGE

At this school staff began the partnership with some pre-existing experience of using creative methods and were keen to stretch their skills to the advanced level of CPD training and subsequent curriculum planning support.

ACTION

Together with staff we identified two priorities: To support pupils' progress with oracy skills and expand their vocabulary and to integrate drama meaningfully into creative writing sessions.

OUTCOME

- Teachers embedded the toolkit activities across the curriculum.
- Children now develop their writing style through role play, dialogue, character development, and performance techniques.
- The quick 20-minute activities described by teachers as a 'game-changer'.



Improving Confidence within existing systems

CHALLENGE

Two schools experienced structural change during their partnerships. One school had been directed to use a pre-written lesson planning system used across their academy-trust. The other was undergoing complex leadership change and had less experienced teaching staff, so supportive and simple implementation was crucial.

ACTION

With the first school we focused on how the toolkit could complement the academy's lesson plans to explore topics in more depth and provide memorable experiences for pupils. For the second school we focused on the fundamental level activities to ensure confidence could grow.

OUTCOME

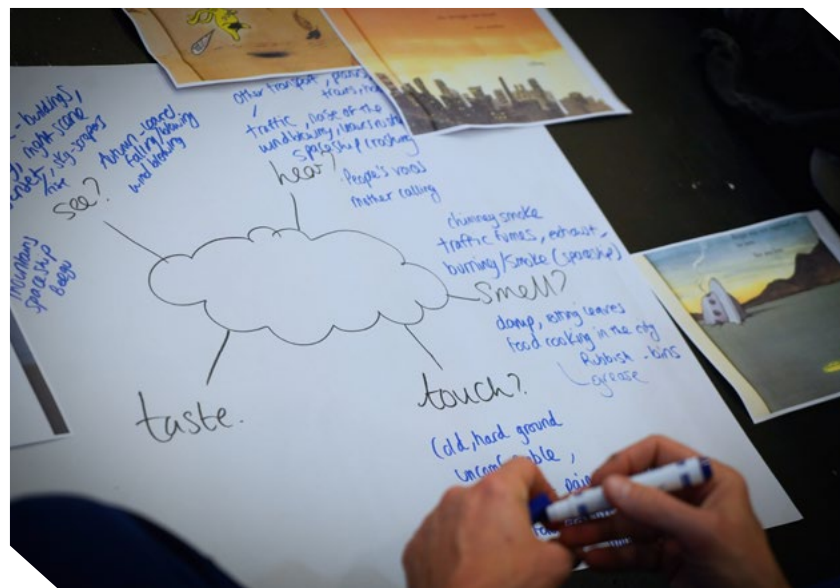
- Many teachers focussed on reading skills, particularly reading comprehension and encouraging a love of reading, and they have gradually observed that integrating the drama toolkit increased engagement and a higher level of enjoyment in learning.
- Other teachers integrated the toolkit into their oracy framework and teaching pupil's critical reasoning skills, with observable positive impact on pupils' acquisition of knowledge and ability to express themselves.



SCHOOL STRATEGIES FOR DRAMA

Co-written in their final year, a School Strategy for Drama supports long-term the ambition to embed Drama & Creative Learning across their curricula. This crucially engages the Senior Leadership Team of each school to ensure the outcomes achieved with teaching staff through the Unicorn partnership have legacy beyond the three partnership years. The strategy design is bespoke to each school, reflecting on how they have chosen to embed the toolkit and how it can be maintained within their individual systems. Importantly, it also aims to incorporate elements of their School Improvement Plan, promoting the use of Creative methods to address strategic goals including academic achievement and local or systemic issues.

Beyond the partnerships, schools are now using their school Strategy to embed Drama & Creative Learning opportunities throughout their curriculum planning & lesson delivery. Pupils benefit from these creative activities in lessons across their curriculum to unlock skills in comprehension and critical thinking, and to support their engagement with the subject-matter.



FEEDBACK AND IMPACT

We have been delighted by the results of this partnership programme, which has not only met our original aims but in some cases achieved genuine and long-lasting cultural change within the schools.

Set 1 Schools: 2021 – 2024

Friars Foundation Primary

(Southwark)

Loughborough Primary

(Lambeth)

Hermitage Primary

(Tower Hamlets)

Set 2 Schools: 2023 – 2026

Snowsfields Primary

(Southwark)

Oasis Academy South Bank

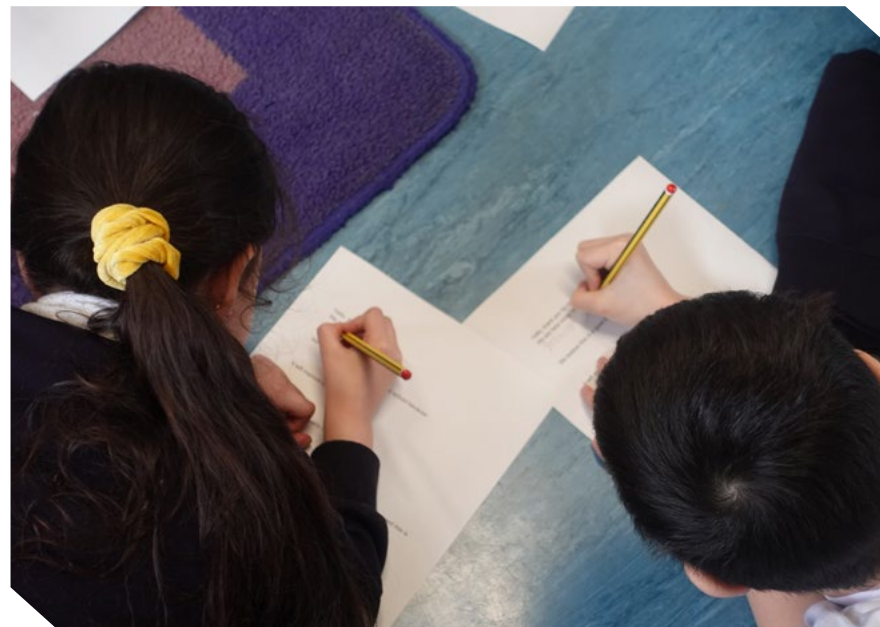
(Lambeth)

Mulberry Canon Barnett Primary

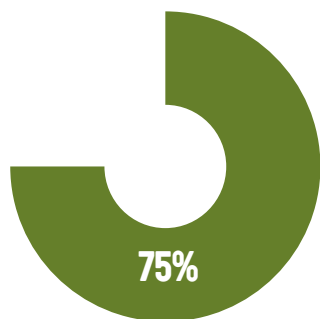
(Tower Hamlets)

“[The Partnership]...shows how important creativity is! The vision is to keep it woven throughout lesson delivery so it’s embedded in our school culture.”

Partner School Headteacher



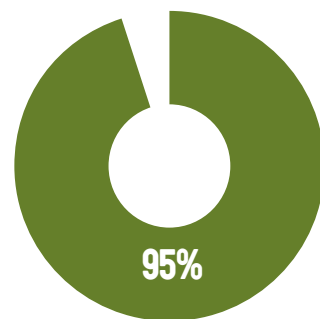
TEACHER CONFIDENCE & SKILL DEVELOPMENT



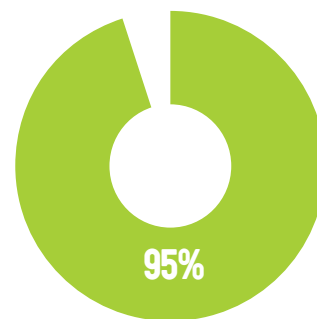
75% of partnership Set 1 teachers reported increased confidence in delivering drama activities after attending CPD



100% learnt new skills or techniques to deliver drama activities

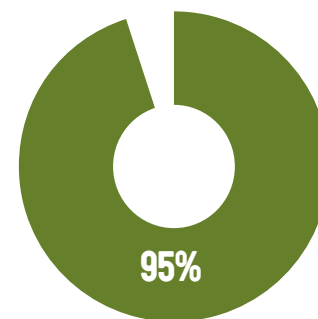


95% of partnership Set 2 teachers reported increased confidence in delivering drama activities after attending CPD

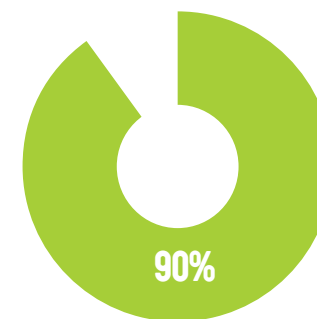


95% learnt new skills or techniques to deliver drama activities.

TEACHING THROUGH DRAMA



95% of set 1 and 2 partnership teachers are now actively integrating drama within their curriculum planning within a year of doing CPD.



90% of set 1 teachers reported confidence in maintaining drama activities following the end of their partnership.

"We have greatly enjoyed being part of this partnership and hope to maintain links and be part of the Unicorn Theatre community."

Partner School Headteacher

IMPROVEMENTS IN LEARNING



100% of set 1 and 2 partnership teachers using drama activities reported a positive impact on learning.

INCLUSION AND SEND

The use of drama and creative learning has had particular impact on EAL and SEND pupils, as it has increased opportunities for these pupils to participate and engage in the curriculum. Progress has also been particularly observed with quieter pupils who are now able to regularly answer questions in class. Finally, the use of drama and creative learning has had impact on pupils' behaviour for learning with some parents even noticing positive changes in their children following Unicorn projects.

IMPACT OBSERVED BY TEACHERS

Across the schools, teachers reported a range of positive outcomes that they observed in their pupils since using drama and creative learning techniques in their classrooms.

- Pupils were “more enthusiastic for learning” and “engaged with the curriculum” as the activities provided “different ways to include every pupil”, not just those ‘above expectations’.
- Pupils developed “better vocabulary, more detailed writing and improved critical thinking skills”.
- Pupils developed oracy skills, particularly with their language and communication and the “activities aided pupil’s memories”.
- Pupils were showing more confidence and creativity, particularly with “expression and tone in public-speaking tasks” and their “teamwork skills were improving”.
- Overall, using drama and creative learning activities in the curriculum ensured a “more enriched and embedded learning experience that catered more broadly for pupil’s different learning needs”, with pupils developing a “deepened understanding of different texts used across subjects” and pupils in lower attainment groups and those with SEND needs connecting more with subject materials.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIC CHANGE

- 100% of both set 1 and 2 partnership SLTs identified the value of drama strategy in enhancing their School Improvement Plans and set 1 SLTs agreed that following the end of their partnership, it has made a positive lasting change at their schools. We will be asking set 2 SLTs to comment on this next year.

Across all six schools, the Senior Leadership Teams reported that overall, their school's engagement with drama had increased since the start of their partnerships, particularly raising pupil's cultural capital and engagement with the theatre.

The lasting change of the partnership across the schools is seen in pupils' increased confidence with speaking & listening skills, as well as improved vocabulary & writing outcomes; in pupils taking part in lessons more, being excited and talking about their learning, with pupils even noticing changes in their fellow classmates; and it is seen in the schools' progress towards achieving oracy targets as part of their School Development Plans.

“Our school drama input has increased...The main benefits are in developing greater confidence and enjoyment amongst pupils and staff. A focus on developing pupils' speaking and listening skills which then feed into their written outcomes. Helping teachers and pupils to explore topics in more depth and giving them memorable experiences and outcomes which will help to embed the learning and allow it to remain with them over time.”

Partner School SLT

“The whole class now see drama as accessible for all – not just for the children who appear the most confident. Drama activities are taken seriously and children focus immediately on the task.”

KS1 teacher

“I think it is such important work and links well to our whole school focus on ‘oracy’. Speaking & Listening, I believe, is a gateway to all other Literacy skills and the work we’ve done this year has really helped our children to progress in this area. Creative approaches to teaching are extremely inclusive and expose children to skills which they might have never known they even had.”

Partner School SLT

“Our partnership with the Unicorn Theatre has had a meaningful and lasting impact. It has provided our pupils with access to high-quality, professional theatre experiences—many for the very first time—and has opened their eyes to the power of storytelling, performance, and creativity. The workshops and performances have supported pupils’ confidence, teamwork, and communication skills, while also enriching their learning across the curriculum. Importantly, the partnership also offered valuable CPD opportunities for staff. Teachers gained practical strategies for embedding drama into everyday teaching and across many subjects, helping to make lessons more engaging, imaginative, and inclusive. As a result, drama is now more confidently used across subjects to support learning, emotional expression, and pupil voice. The enthusiasm for drama among both pupils and staff is a clear reflection of how impactful and transformative this collaboration has been.”

Partner School Headteacher



REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

Whilst we celebrate the fantastic outcomes we achieved together with the first six schools, this work is still evolving. We have leant into challenges; we've listened, observed and reflected; working closely with our school colleagues to ensure the offer meets their needs.

THE CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE FOR SCHOOLS

Schools are under immense pressure from budget cuts, time-poor staff, and the pandemic having a knock-on effect on pupil's comprehension and skills development. Despite these challenges, all six partner schools were determined their children should experience an arts-rich curriculum and access cultural capital by committing to this partnership.

ACTION

Recognising the steadfast commitments of teachers to take part, we were flexible to these pressures faced by schools. If necessary, we placed additional facilitators on R&D projects or provided twilight sessions for staff to embed creativity into their curriculum. Staff

turnover occurred at several schools, including key partnership staff, so having a dedicated member of Unicorn staff to hold those relationships was essential. The programme has been carefully designed so that the work is held and championed by numerous staff, making it less vulnerable to a key staff member leaving. In future, we will continue to consult with partner schools on how best to support them through the partnership, recognising different needs and paces.

CHALLENGES IN DELIVERING WHOLE-SCHOOL CPD

Asking all staff to attend CPD sessions was tricky for schools, impacting their budgets (due to cover staff) and curriculum delivery time. It could also affect teachers' experiences of the CPD sessions if sessions were less well attended.

ACTION

We consulted with schools on dates and offered individual-school CPD including evening and Inset sessions where no other option was possible. In the future, we are looking at opening our CPD delivery to a wider selection of teaching and support staff, to provide more children with the opportunity to experience an arts-rich education, whilst also providing one-to-one bespoke support to select schools.

CHILDREN AS ARTISTS – FURTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Research & Development projects ran for approximately 5-6 weeks with weekly sessions during half a term. In some projects we found that pupil's comprehension and skills development was around one or two years behind what we'd expect for their age due to lasting impacts of the pandemic. We also lacked time to build foundational knowledge and understanding of theatre-making with pupils, particularly for our youngest children, which limited how well they could engage with an R&D process. We sometimes had to adjust our expectations and make accommodations for pupils' needs within a short timeframe. Evaluation of children's progress was done within the 5-6-week projects, with little room for longer-term tracking of progress, which would produce more reliable and meaningful results.

ACTION

For future school partnerships we have designed longer 10-week projects over a whole term, with carefully designed sessions to develop core creative skills and knowledge before collaboration with artists begins. This makes it easier to respond to children's individual and collective needs and provides a longer time to see how they are progressing. We have also introduced a teacher-led project in the second year of the partnership scheme, supported by our Primary Drama Consultant, which will further develop the opportunities for pupil's skills development and cement the legacy of this work.



IMPORTANCE OF DRAMA AND CREATIVITY BEYOND MAINSTREAM PROVISION

SEND children in mainstream schools often do not receive as many opportunities as their mainstream peers are afforded. A report by the Parliamentary Accounts Committee in 2020* assessed the support that SEND children receive in schools and found that SEND and disabled children are “being failed by a system riddled with inequalities” with “many of the 1.3 million pupils in England with SEND...not receiving adequate support”. We sometimes found it tricky to find the time or resources to fully engage with SEND pupils in our projects, but we would consistently receive feedback from teachers about the significant impact that our work was having on their SEND pupils and those with barriers to learning. We identified a need to expand opportunities for experiencing accessible and inclusive theatre and a creative arts-rich curriculum beyond our work in mainstream classrooms.

ACTION

We want to better understand how to make theatre accessible and inclusive for a wide range of children’s needs, whilst expanding access to the arts for SEND pupils. In our second set of partner schools, we partnered with a primary school that has specialist Autism provision attached to their mainstream provision (Rainbow class). With Rainbow class, we delivered bespoke projects that not only supported us to learn more about creating theatre for SEND pupils and Access needs but also broadened the impact of our work to include those pupils. Teachers told us how valuable this work was, and we are now expanding our future partnerships to include work with a local SEND Specialist primary school and a local Alternative Provision primary school.

Rainbow class feedback:

“The Unicorn team were very responsive to include features of our topics, and we discussed at length the needs of the pupils beforehand. The workshops were wonderfully stimulating and reminded me of why I do my job and how vital sensory learning is for our class when done well.”

Autism Base teacher

* [Parliamentary Report 2020](#)



FINAL THOUGHTS

Now working with our third set of local partner schools, this work plays a significant role in how we make theatre at the Unicorn, and we have learnt a great deal about genuine collaboration with schools. We continue to make sure this work benefits all: for the schools in developing their pupils' cultural capital, their teachers' confidence in delivering an arts-rich curriculum; supporting the Unicorn in continuing to create and deliver high-quality children's theatre; and increasing access to the arts for our local families who continue relationships with us beyond the partnerships.

The Creative Hub has been fundamentally shaped by our work with and learning from schools. Some children who first encountered our theatre during a school R&D project have become Creative Associates who independently attend projects at The Unicorn to develop upcoming shows with our creative teams. We also have many local families who first engaged via school, and who now bring their children to the theatre regularly. Our work with schools has also informed our role in a new project, a national creative intervention to support creative, curriculum-embedded practice with teachers across the country. It continues to be a central pillar and vital part of our offer.

"Nobody knows what it's like to be young today better than children themselves, and I am thrilled to see our...Creative Hub ushering in new ways for us to put children at the heart of our mission. These projects and programmes are so integral to how the Unicorn centres children as the experts in their own experiences and invites them to work with professional Unicorn Theatre artists through conversations, collaboration and co-design. The centrality and integrity of this work is just one of the many reasons that make running the Unicorn my total dream job."

Rachel Bagshaw, Artistic Director of the Unicorn Theatre





At the Unicorn we create new, inventive and enthralling theatre experiences for children aged up to 13. Every year, we welcome around 65,000 families and schools through our doors, and many thousands more through our tours and Unicorn Online.

We believe that young people of all ages, perspectives and abilities have the right to experience exciting, entertaining and inspiring work and we actively seek out children who wouldn't otherwise attend, offering free tickets where needed. Through our Creative Hub, we develop productions with children from our local partner schools and communities to ensure that our work remains relevant and informed by the young people we serve.

For more information, see unicorntheatre.com

ABOUT THE UNICORN'S CREATIVE HUB

The Unicorn centres children in all of our work, we are artist-led and child-centred. Our **Creative Hub** connects Unicorn artists and facilitators with children aged 0 – 13 years as creative collaborators, resulting in first encounters for children as theatre makers. We make space for children to inform creative processes as experts, influencing and shaping the work on our stages. With the support of these young Creative Associates we engage with children's unique perspective of the world.

We collaborate with local children who live or go to school within 30 minutes of our venue, including the boroughs of Southwark, Tower Hamlets, City of London and Lambeth.

THE FOUR STRANDS OF CREATIVE HUB ACTIVITY ARE:

Creative Families Children aged 0-7 and their grown-ups, collaborating with artists to develop work for our youngest audiences

Creative Schools In-depth, multi-year, partnerships with local schools culminating in a school strategy for Drama

Creative Associates Children aged 8-13 working in-depth with artists to develop new productions.

Unicorn Local Supports first encounters with the Unicorn through off-site workshops at Family Hubs and Libraries and free tickets to Unicorn productions.

CREDITS

This report has been written by Shanti Sarkar, Creative Hub Schools Producer, and Georgia Dale, Creative Hub Director.

If you would like more information, please contact us on creativehub@unicorntheatre.com

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