

Building oracy and communication skills through drama

Background to the school

Bournville Primary School, part of the Extend Learning Academies Network, describes itself as “a vibrant and nurturing community in Weston-super-Mare where children aged 2 to 11 begin and grow their learning journey in a safe, inspiring environment...We offer children rich opportunities to explore, play, and thrive. From nursery through to Year 6, we foster curiosity, achievement, and strong values, supported by wraparound care and a close partnership with families.”

Bournville Primary School has around 530 pupils on roll and serves the Bournville Estate; a “complex community” positioned in the top 1% of the most deprived areas of England in the 2025 English Indices of Deprivation. Nearly 60% of pupils in this mainstream school are eligible for free school meals and almost half have special educational needs (SEN). Every class has around four children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). A growing percentage of pupils at the school come from families where English is an additional language (currently around 19%, up from 10% two years ago) and the increasingly multicultural demographic is celebrated within the school. Bournville Primary School seeks to be “a school family” and this language is used frequently to describe this nurturing community.

Bournville Primary School
Key Stages 1 and 2
Creative Practitioner:
Toby Hulse

Specific residency objectives:

- **To support and develop the school’s focus on oracy.**
- **To nurture the development of pupils’ language acquisition, supporting them to be able to speak in full sentences and express themselves.**
- **To promote pupils’ verbal and non-verbal communication skills through developing a range of techniques and develop the confidence to speak out loud, projecting their voice and using their voices playfully.**
- **To promote pupils’ sense of community ownership, belonging and pride through collaboratively working with peers and sharing and celebrating their work with the wider community.**
- **To support teachers and other staff in the school in expanding the range of creative drama techniques used across their teaching to enrich learning and engagement across the curriculum and wider school life.**

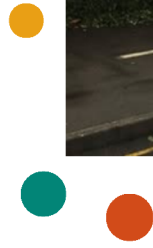


Aims and synopsis for the residency

Bournville Primary School’s leadership recognise and value the importance of strong verbal and non-verbal communication and there is an ongoing focus on developing children’s oracy skills across the school. Supporting children to develop their language skills and have the confidence to speak out loud and communicate in a range of everyday situations is an ongoing mission at Bournville. Adults in the school model “high-quality interactions” from the moment the pupils arrive at school, and this starts with a “meet and greet” in the playground, which many children find difficult. The Headteacher is passionate about giving the children across the school skills for learning and life, now and in the future, and especially into being able to thrive in secondary school and beyond.



Photo Courtesy of Bournville Primary School



Our children, they can be quite challenging to engage and in those slightly more unstructured activities like drama, music, those sorts of things, can lose it quite quickly and then you know that that you have those problems. But I think that there was a very clear ability for [Toby] to build those relationships really quickly with the children. And I think the greatest and the most successful work we ever do with any outside person coming in to work with us is around their ability to establish those relationships really quickly and get the best out of the children.



Marie Berry, Headteacher

In collaboration with leaders at WEMA’s Cultural Education Hub, Bournville Primary School chose to work with Toby Hulse for this residency, a playwright, director and creative practitioner who specialises in making Theatre for family audiences and in educational contexts. Toby was known to the school through work with his company Roustabout, who have developed three shows there in a co-creation model, as well as toured work for performance. The school leadership felt that Toby’s work and focus aligned with their priorities. It was also important to them to work with a creative practitioner who already knew the school, was familiar with the community context and had shown that they had the skills to work in this unique community, as past experience had shown that this initially was a challenge for some practitioners to adapt to the context. It was noted that time needs to be invested in building relationships with the children and becoming a familiar and welcoming face within the community.

The creative practitioner worked with every class from Year 2 to Year 6 as part of this residency. The delivery of the workshops happened across two time periods. For three afternoons in October 2025, Toby worked with one Year 3 and one Year 4 class for 45-60 minutes per week, where he introduced drama games and exercises that were focussed on speaking, listening and communication. A focus in these sessions was to be able to speak out loud to the group and to reflect on and express what this felt like.

Through discussion with the class teachers, Toby selected two stories from the school's 'Opening Worlds' humanities curriculum to develop further in the second part of the residency. Plans for this were shared with pupils before the first part of the residency so that they knew what was to come and could be excited about this. Toby created a script for 'Rama and Sita' (year 3) and 'Julius Caesar' (year 4) in which there were speaking parts for all pupils. He worked with the same classes for five afternoons in March 2026, rehearsing these short plays for an informal performance at the end of the residency.

Additionally, Toby worked across all the other Year 2 to Year 6 classes for between 60 and 90 minutes during the second part of the residency. The stimulus for each class was bespoke for the pupils in each specific class and the focus was on verbal and non-verbal communication through games, exercises and exploring speaking and listening alongside working towards a collective and community-owned focus. Whilst the residency has now finished, it is the school's intention that the pupils will continue rehearsing the short plays and give

“ It made me more confident because I was picked to do something in front of the whole class - I didn't think I would ever do that. ”

Year 6 pupil

a presentation to other pupils and an invited audience of parents and carers in assembly later this term, to which Toby will be invited.

As with all of the WEMA residencies, research meetings were held at the beginning and the end and the creative practitioner and the school were supported to consider what 'success' would look like and how they would evidence the process and outcomes.

Observations were collected throughout the process by the creative practitioner, class teachers and, at points, the Headteacher, who also actively sought feedback from the teachers and pupils on a regular basis. Pupils were also encouraged to reflect on how they felt about the workshops and the activities within them as part of each session and to talk about their thoughts and feelings.



Photo Courtesy of Toby Hulse

Key Outcomes

Young People

➤ The residency was described as ‘ambitious’. It gave pupils opportunities to engage in experiences they would not otherwise have had in school or, in most cases, out of school.

➤ Multiple examples of pupils who both thrived and surprised themselves and staff with their levels of engagement, enjoyment and confidence were shared.

➤ By having the session organised into two periods of time and working repeatedly with classes, the Year 3 and Year 4 children had the chance to get to know the creative practitioner better and build their confidence and trust in him and each other. They were able to look forward to the second set of workshops and knew what to expect so they could be more excited and relaxed about this.

➤ Each time the creative practitioner visited the school, more children acknowledged him and said hello around the school and asked if he was coming to their class today. Becoming a familiar face and ‘part of the school community’ reportedly helped pupils to feel more confident to engage in unfamiliar learning and be more open to being out of their comfort zone.

➤ Many children enjoyed having their own script, which ‘some took everywhere around the school’ with them. It was noted that the visibility of having the printed script itself was an important part of engendering a sense of belonging, ownership and pride, and demonstrates the power of working authentically.

➤ Whilst each child had their own line(s) to say, they took on helping each other out by prompting or filling in lines in a kindly and supportive way without taking over. This is different to former situations where this would have caused disagreements and disgruntlement within the class as pupils were previously noticeably ‘more precious’ about it.

➤ A small minority of Year 3 pupils were fully involved until the informal performance, when nerves/shyness were evident and they did not participate. In all workshops there were opportunities in the workshops for this to be talked about and feelings normalised, and also reflections on the paradox of not being or feeling able to participate but simultaneously not wanting to let others down.

➤ Even when they chose not to speak to begin with, most pupils stood with the group and were part of the play. Some pupils observed and then joined in when they were more ready to do so. Sometimes evidence of their listening and learning from the sidelines emerged later in the process and this demonstrates the importance of supporting children to stay in the room and keep an open mind about levels of engagement and learning.

“ One of the skills we are desperately constantly trying to build with our children is resilience, in that when something's challenging, we don't just give up and walk away from it, we find a way...actually giving children opportunities to speak and be able in [Toby's] very warm, very nice way which drama and this theatre model actually shows that. ”

Marie Berry, Headteacher

➤ Observing the creative artist make changes and adaptations ‘in the moment’ to find solutions to tricky situations and to make things work for all was considered helpful in modelling flexibility and problem-solving to the children.

➤ The exercises and games with each class focussed on building trust, oracy and verbal and non-verbal communication. This included being able to say and express oneself in different ways. The Headteacher reiterated that many children at Bourneville find it hard to express themselves and their emotions, especially when they are in a tricky situation, and the school hope that embedding drama techniques and drawing on the processes and outcomes of this residency will help develop pupils’ ability and confidence to communicate in other contexts, including supporting the school’s work around Zones of Regulation.

➤ Some classes visibly struggled with exercises such as being able to make and maintain eye contact with each other. This observation made teachers reflect on the benefit of using the exercises the creative practitioner introduced in the future to put more emphasis on developing skills, habits and behaviours that are needed to thrive personally and collectively as well as academically.

“ My class loved it! It was lovely to see some of the more nervous, quieter children grow in confidence over the hour Toby was with us. I saw sides and confidence from some children I didn't expect too. ”

Year 6 teacher



Photo Courtesy of Bourneville Primary School

Staff

➤ Multiple teachers reportedly expressed their joy at observing children in their classes engage with the creative learning opportunities that proliferated in the workshops and grow in confidence through the process.

➤ Allowing and encouraging children the space and time to bring their humour into the workshops was very impactful for building relationships with adults and each other, and this in itself is seen as a very important skill to develop. The Headteacher also commented on the importance of this in terms of helping pupils recognise where to draw the line within a school context.

➤ The impact on teachers’ thinking and practice from supporting and observing the creative practitioner’s ways of working in the workshops was a common feature of the feedback provided by teachers to the Headteacher. This demonstrates the importance and potential power of in-situ opportunities for teachers to learn with and from experts in their field, observing how they work with young people in real-life, not only hearing about theoretical situations, and having opportunities to follow this up with professional conversations to understand how and why decisions were

made. Having one-off opportunities to work with the creative practitioner was considered useful and even more so, to have repeated opportunities for this.

➤ Teachers observed how the creative practitioner supported children to be able to access and use spoken and written language. Examples shared included strategies being scaffolded in multiple ways to remember lines and to speak out loud with understanding and varied use of their voices, regardless of whether they were competent or confident readers, and also how to develop children’s co-owned scripts. Some teachers reported gaining new ways to support pupils that may help children to engage more confidently with learning across the breadth of the curriculum.

➤ Developing children’s speech and their toolkit of language and ways to communicate and express themselves has been shown through this residency to be beneficial in the short term to individuals and whole classes. Whilst the longer-term impact of this, and the residency as a whole, is as yet unknown, the experience has reaffirmed their interest in taking this work further.

➤ The exercises with each class focussed on oracy and communication, and being able to say and express oneself in different ways. The Headteacher reiterated that many children at Bourneville find it hard to express themselves and their emotions, especially when they are in a tricky situation, and they hope that embedding drama techniques and drawing on the experiences of this residency will help develop their ability and confidence to communicate.

“ Where you get the best out of any of these sorts of projects long term is where you've got somebody, that expert, who's coming in regularly to deliver that provision at the highest standard and with it comes the CPD. What will have happened last week is for those teachers that had the little session, they've had a little snippet of it, but for [the teachers in Year 3 and 4], they've had a week of CPD alongside Toby...So that's the legacy, that's the bit where you build that in working alongside those colleagues and building their confidence and skill set to be able to deliver this moving forward. ”

Marie Berry, Headteacher

Creative Practitioner

➤ The creative practitioner talked about his priority in ensuring that all pupils had a spoken line within the scripts he prepared and the importance he placed on this, regardless of whether the children delivered their line in the performance.

➤ This residency provided opportunities for the creative practitioner to work with all pupils from Year 2 to Year 6. This wide experience gave the artist a lot to reflect upon in relation to working with children of different ages and at different stages in their education, and to think about the different character of each class, their preferences and readiness to take creative risks.

➤ The creative practitioner reflected on the varied roles of the adults (teachers and support staff) in each workshop and how

they seamlessly supported individual pupils and groups in and out of activities through insightful reading of emergent situations as they arose. He was grateful for their engagement and recognised the importance of their roles in keeping workshops on track as pupil's engagement ebbed and flowed alongside changing levels of confidence and resilience.

➤ He also reflected on the sense of community and support for each other in each class, with children noting the learning challenges of their peers (for example with reading) and of their own volition, finding constructive ways to support them.

➤ The Year 3 play was initially less successful at keeping all pupils engaged and the creative practitioner reflected on whether this was in part related to the choice of public performance as a key outcome. However, the class teacher and pupils are still working on the play now the residency has finished and links to the curriculum are considered useful. Through a professional

“ The work with 4B was particularly successful because as I walked into the classroom, they had on the wall a script that they'd been writing, and obviously [script writing] was something that was of interest to the class teacher...So I was able to link the practical work really closely to their curriculum study and teacher and the children all said now it had given them a different understanding to what they've been doing with the script work. ”

Toby Hulse, Creative Practitioner



Photo Courtesy of Bournville Primary School

conversation with the school's headteacher, he could see that, on balance, the materials and the approaches were suited to many of the pupils and that for others, it took longer for them to gain the confidence and/or resilience to contribute. His continual adaptations to "make things work" were noticed and his flexibility was appreciated.

➤ The two periods of time in school with a gap in between provided opportunities for the creative practitioner to talk to staff and work with the children before the bespoke scripts were prepared. Being familiar with the school through previous work was considered advantageous by the school and creative practitioner. This allowed him to quickly adapt to the needs, personality and aspirations of each class, including in the one-off sessions across years 2 to 6 in the final part of the residency. His ability to build relationships quickly and to build on pupils' own ideas and "run with it" were noted by the Headteacher as a contributory factor in the success of this residency.

Unexpected outcomes, challenges and further considerations

➤ The flexibility of the creative practitioner and his ability to be so versatile and work through a cross-curricular lens were praised by the Headteacher. This has provided much food for thought for the school in terms of how aspects of their curriculum could be planned and accessed in more creative ways in order to hook more children into learning.

➤ The outcomes of this residency reminded the Headteacher of the importance of providing opportunities and providing support for children to work towards something they can collectively own, perform and celebrate, which has “fallen off the radar since Covid”. Teachers and the Headteacher reflected on the power of drama and creative learning to engage and inspire pupils and the importance of continuing to use this in the future. This may include adding new clubs to the school’s extra-curricular offer, depending upon the capacity of the staff, and there are plans for it to be threaded through the curriculum to enhance and support academic and holistic learning.

“ The children loved the workshop and were really excited to be given parts and a script. It was lovely that they worked on a story that they were already familiar with and linked to the curriculum, which brought their learning alive. Toby was brilliant with the children; he had endless energy and enthusiasm making it fun and engaging. He was nurturing and kind and worked hard to make sure all children felt included.

Year 3 teacher

➤ A second upcoming performance provides an opportunity for pupils who did not participate in the informal performances by choice and for multiple reasons, including lack of confidence, not yet being ready to step outside of the safety of just performing with the class and through performance-day nerves or shyness. Those who participated in the informal performances efforts and achievements were applauded and externally validated. It is hoped that having seen their peers getting this response, more will want to participate next time. This shows the importance of having multiple entry and re-entry points for engagement in order to include more pupils when they are ready, as has been the case throughout this residency.

➤ The workshop lengths were flexibly between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on how a class responded on the day, which was often reportedly related to the age and maturity of pupils. Leaving flexibility in a timetable, rather than rigidly sticking to fixed times was useful and gave space and time for work to flourish and come to a natural end. Whilst this is challenging for school timetabling, it shows that willingness to be led by the pupils can be very fruitful and organic.

➤ The authentic way in which pupils worked with and were treated by the artist contributed to the sense of purpose and ownership. The collective ambition and being able to visualise the tangible goal is important to this and can be motivating. The importance of “the goal” is sometimes lost in day-to-day education, as reflected on by the Headteacher.

➤ Seeing the responses of the children to creating something and working at it for a performance that they own and feel part of has made the staff team consider how they can bring the community into the school more to share and celebrate children’s achievements through artform engagement more regularly, for example, in assemblies.

➤ The Headteacher and creative practitioner reflected on the limitations and pressure of a “very packed” school curriculum and the demands and challenges this brings to staff and schools. The learning processes and levels of engagement seen in this residency are deemed important to future thinking and curriculum planning.

➤ The Headteacher highlighted the significant contribution that this residency has brought to the school through collaborating with the WEMA’s Cultural Education Hub and the importance of being financially and practically supported throughout the process, as well as providing the opportunities to reflect as part of the process. As a school in an area of significant deprivation, such opportunities are not ordinarily available to children in this area, and yet the impact of this residency across the school community is palpable. Finding ways to sustain and develop this work is important to the school and highlighted as an ongoing challenge.

“ And it felt like, if nothing else, it presented a model of ‘if you find something challenging, find another way around it’. It’s the secret of being a successful human, isn’t it? ”

Toby Hulse, Creative Practitioner

“ Opportunities for these sorts of things are really, really important in actually giving young people in this area, in such an area of disadvantage, an opportunity to express themselves through theatre, through drama, through the arts. ”

Marie Berry, Headteacher

Toby Hulse

Toby Hulse is a playwright and director who creates theatre for young and family audiences, and in educational contexts. He has made work for theatres and companies across the UK, teaches regularly in drama schools and universities, and is a regular visitor to schools in the South West.

Toby has twice won the Distinguished Play Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, for his plays *To Dream Again* (2018) and *Beowulf* (2019), and received the Special Achievement in Innovation Award at the 2025 UK Pantomime Awards. His production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Southwark Playhouse (2025) was nominated for an Off West End Award for Innovation.

He is also one quarter of Roustabout Theatre, an award-winning team of theatre makers based in Bristol, born out of over ten years of collaboration and nonsense. Performed in theatres, schools, libraries & community venues, their work is for audiences of all ages, for anyone who loves play, and for anyone who delights in the communal act of sharing a story.

www.roustabouttheatre.co.uk

Acknowledgements

Dr Ally Daubney

Dr Ally Daubney is a researcher, teacher and educator who has worked across all ages and stages of education from preschool to postgraduate. Alongside her extensive work on international curriculum development and assessment, Ally is renowned for her work on creative and cultural learning and engagement across education and communities. She has conducted and widely published research and evaluation funded by local, regional, national and international organisations which has fed into policy making in the UK and abroad. Ally led the research strand for the West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub 2024-2026. Ally is co-editor of the British Journal of Music Education and an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex.

Megan Clarke

Megan Clarke was the programme lead for West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub during the period of this research. She is an arts and cultural engagement professional with over 10 years of experience working with children and young people, communities and artists to deliver inspiring creative engagement projects in the cultural sector. She has a passion for supporting people from all backgrounds to engage with arts and culture and the positive impact this has on people's lives.

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