Regeneration of creative career pathways through a drama education residency

Photo Courtesy of Brave Bold Drama

Bridge Learning Campus
Key Stages 1 and 2
Creative Organisation: Brave Bold Drama

Background to the school

Bridge Learning Campus (BLC) is a non-selective all-through academy for pupils aged 3 to 16. Located in South Bristol, it serves the diverse Hartcliffe community. BLC describes itself as 'a school with a strong inclusive ethos. We welcome all students, and we do everything we can to help them succeed. Our ambitious, knowledge-rich curriculum shows our high expectations for every student and prepares them well for the next stage of education and the workplace'. There are approximately 1250 pupils on roll at BLC, with around 750 in the school's secondary provision.

Bridge Learning campus is situated in one of the most deprived areas of Bristol and in the top 3% of the most deprived areas in Britain in relation to income, employment, health and education, highlighting significant and persistent inequalities and challenges (English Indices of Deprivation 2025). Just over 56% of pupils at BLC are eligible for free school meals.

Specific residency objectives:

- **To develop young people's aspirations and awareness of more diverse creative career pathways through making them more visible.**
- **To raise pupils' aspirations for Drama.**
- **To support the reintroduction of a Drama BTEC for Key Stage 4 pupils.**
- **To provide opportunities for Key Stage 3 pupils to gain accreditation for their work on this residency as part of the Arts Award.**
- **To support a whole-school impact through CPD.**
- **To build staff confidence and capacity to embed creative careers education in ongoing subject delivery and as a catalyst for long term curriculum development in drama.**

Background to Brave Bold Drama

Brave Bold Drama is a not-for-profit community interest company. They describe the organisation as 'led by two freelance artists who are working class and LGBTQI+. We make award-winning theatre for families and for those living with dementia, and run a broad portfolio of community art projects made with and for working class communities'. Brave Bold Drama have worked with Bridge Learning Campus previously.

Photo Courtesy of Brave Bold Drama

Aims and synopsis of the residency

Bridge Learning Campus reintroduced drama on a carousel as a Key Stage 3 subject in the previous academic year, after 8 years of not having a drama specialist. With the removal of the EBacc accountability measure and drama being reintroduced into the curriculum at BLC, staff were keen to encourage students to broaden their options through subject choices and progression routes, particularly in creative subjects. This residency aimed to directly support the goal of building a visible, valued performing arts pathway, from KS3 to KS4 qualifications and beyond. The timing of this residency was considered ideal to consolidate Drama's new presence and support the successful introduction of a BTEC Drama qualification, which had failed to attract enough interest when offered in the previous academic year.

> "The highlights - going over to the Bottle Yard [Studios] and our children being able to see what was in place over there and so close on their doorstep. I think everything that they've been out and seen has been really, really buzzy."
>
> Liz Hackling, Head of Pupil Engagement

These are central to BLC's wider strategy to raise student aspirations and diversify progression routes, particularly in an area where access to cultural and creative industries for pupils in this school and area are historically limited. There is a clear arts entitlement gap in areas like Hartcliffe, and nationally, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are significantly less likely to study arts subjects at KS4 and beyond (as highlighted in the government's recent Curriculum Review report) or work in the creative industries. This residency aimed to address that gap directly by raising the profile of Drama career pathways and boosting uptake at KS4. A drama residency was considered a suitable way to raise aspirations and widen progression pathways in a community with limited access to cultural capital.

The residency was noted as being potentially useful in helping the school respond to recent changes to statutory career guidance for schools in England from the UK government. This includes a requirement to strengthen arrangements for work-related activities for pupils in years 7-9 from September 2025 as well as providing

work experience for pupils in years 10 and 11. The residency was planned to support the school in developing new opportunities in this area, building longer term impact through developing staff knowledge of creative career pathways and developing local industry connections.

The residency also sought to help build staff confidence and capacity to embed creative careers education in ongoing subject delivery and as a catalyst for long term curriculum development in Drama, which was considered to nurture skills, values, habits and behaviours that support life and learning in other ways beyond subject study.

Bridge Learning Campus and creative practitioners from Brave Bold Drama elected to work together on this residency. The school recognises the value of this theatre company being established by two working-class artists who grew up locally to the school and know the local context.

Photo Courtesy of Brave Bold Drama

The residency, which took place over the first two terms of the 2025-26 academic year, had several interweaving strands. Up to 20 places were made available for Year 9 students to attend backstage tours at The Bottle Yard Studio, the largest film and TV studio facility in the West of England (owned and managed by Bristol City Council) and to Bristol Hippodrome, a large professional theatre venue in central Bristol. Jen Roxburgh, a freelance lighting designer spent a day with Gill Simmons from Brave Bold Drama sorting out the lighting rig at the school, as it had fallen into disrepair and staff did not have the expertise to mend and use it. A staff training session on how to use it was facilitated and a detailed instruction manual was written to support its use in the future.

Following the trips, an after-school drama club was established through the offer of six 90-minute sessions in which film making was centrally positioned as chosen by those who participated. Three short films were produced by the young people who attended, and this culminated in an after-school film premier to an invited audience of staff, parents, carers and friends in March 2026, complete with popcorn. A Q&A panel with the creative practitioners from Brave Bold Drama took place after the screening.

As a final part of the residency, the six students who attended the drama club regularly further edited the films finalise and share. This work constituted the final requirements for the externally certificated 'Arts Award Discover' award.

Key Outcomes

Young People

One of the key reasons given in the application for this residency was for Bridge Learning Campus to reintroduce Performing Arts as a Key Stage 4 option in September 2026. Following the residency, 30 students have now signed up to study Drama BTEC next year. This is a significant outcome for BLC and its young people.

The backstage tour excursion at Bottle Yard Studios reportedly inspired pupils in multiple ways. They got first-hand access to professional equipment and learnt how it is used and how this relates to ways in which it could impact their own film making and editing, which fed directly into the films made through the drama club.

Bottle Yard Studios is within very close walking distance of the school. From the visit, pupils were able to appreciate and be inspired by having this in their community.

The opportunity to do a backstage tour at Bristol Hippodrome was also very popular with pupils. As with the trip to Bottle Yard

> They were buzzing for it [sharing the film] because they felt so safe to do that. And that's the environment that Gill and Paul and Laurie created. They had a safe space in which they could be creative. And they had, you know, some students saying, "no, I don't want to act". And by the end of it, they all showed their face in [the film]. So, it was brilliant.
>
> Liz Hackling, Head of Pupil Engagement

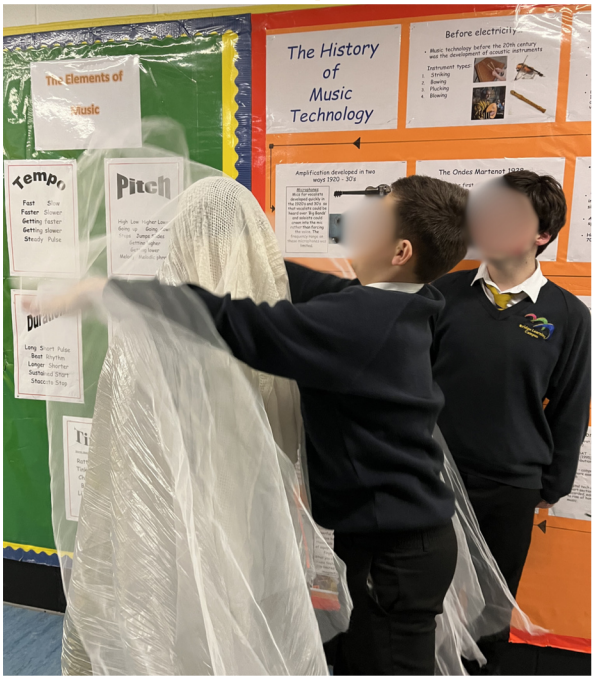

Photo Courtesy of Brave Bold Drama

Studios, the authenticity of being in a professional venue was reportedly inspiring and 'mind-blowing'. Being on the stage was 'an experience some will never forget'; one pupil burst into song and gave a spontaneous performance.

The initial stimulus for the films provided a scaffold which was linked to the young people's lives, locality and preferences. This framework encouraged them to generate and grow their own creative ideas and resulted in three very different films which were linked together for the screening.

The name for the film company- "Trapped Monster Studios" - was chosen by the young people, which related to Yoda tied to some railings near the school that they all noted as something they saw every day.

The young people taking part in the drama club chose the roles they took, whether this was acting, filming or being more involved in the production side of film making.

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Having something for the young people to work towards, share and celebrate which they owned was considered to be particularly important and powerful.

The drop-down day for the final part of Arts Award Discover offered opportunities for pupils to make creative post-production decisions as they considered what to do with their film next. External validation of their efforts and achievements is appreciated as an outcome from this residency.

The residency offered opportunities for young people who would not normally work together, and whom teachers "might previously not have considered putting together in a group" to share a space and cooperate with each other. This was considered pastorally beneficial as well as educationally helpful.

Photo Courtesy of Brave Bold Drama

Staff

Staff talked about why Year 9 pupils were selected to be involved in this residency. They reflected on the challenges of getting pupils involved and the role of the drama teacher, who is also Head of Year 9, in signposting the opportunities, actively recruiting pupils to engage at the start of the residency and how momentum built through the off-site excursions.

A school leader described the impact of the residency on the wider school community. In particular, the legacy of now having a viable cohort for KS4 Drama qualifications is considered as a transformative outcome as it raises the profile of drama across the school and has started to change the way the creative arts are viewed and valued.

The drama teacher is relatively new to the area, having lived and worked in London previously. She appreciated the connections and professional network this residency has tapped her into and the potential to be more connected in the future.

The drama teacher chose not to be present in the after-school workshops. She felt that it was important for the young people to work uninhibited by the presence of staff from the school and that experience of working with the creative practitioners as a small group was authentic and inspiring.

> "I know that Tim, who's our Head of Music, has been dying to get those lights going for years and he was absolutely buzzing. And that made his brain go full of magical things he can do at the Christmas concerts. So yeah, it's not just a one-time CPD, it's a gift."

Liz Hackling, Head of Pupil Engagement

Around 30 staff from across the school attended the screening of the young people's film. Comments from staff included reflections on how surprised they were to see the young people's confidence, which is not always evident in other curriculum areas.

Performing arts teachers and technicians from across multiple departments attended the CPD session on how to use the school's lighting rig and this has sparked ideas on using the lighting in the future, bringing more authenticity and professionalism to events. Some staff now feel confident to use it and are appreciative of the offer of being able to contact the creative practitioners for advice and practical support in the future if required. Having a professional freelance lighting designer co-leading this CPD also offered an opportunity for the school's music teacher to have a professional conversation about sound.

A bespoke training manual, produced by the creative practitioners, was described as "invaluable" in supporting staff to be able to use the lighting rig for future concerts, performances and events and is part of the legacy from this residency identified by one of the school's senior leaders.

The film is considered by staff to be an important tool in helping to recruit for drama at Key Stage 4 in future years.

Photo Courtesy of Brave Bold Drama

> I just want to say how incredible it was - we had Gill and Jen doing our whole lighting rig, and there were about five or six staff that came to the actual talk. But actually, because they put together a booklet and all the information, that CPD is going to be ongoing…And that means our technicians can now teach the people to use it. So, it isn't just a one-time CPD session. This is going to be a Bible for us, for lighting, for an exceedingly long time.
>
> Louise Saunders, Drama Teacher / Head of Year 9

Creative Practitioners

This residency provided opportunities for creative practitioners with links to this area and an affinity with this community to collaborate with the school. Bringing this level of commitment and understanding into this school was appreciated and valued.

The process of creating the films has supported the young people to develop a range of film making and editing skills. The tools and technologies were specifically chosen by the creative practitioners so that they would be readily accessible in school and potentially at home, utilising mobile phones and without additional cost for the young people to do this for themselves in the future. The creative artists expressed the importance of this accessibility.

One of the creative practitioners leading this residency is a former secondary school drama teacher. This was considered by the school to be particularly useful in understanding the challenges faced by schools, and particularly this school and area. Through careful planning, the residency linked directly to the school's priorities and curriculum, including the forthcoming Drama BTEC.

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> The fact that the residency encompassed more than just the direct engagement with students is lovely. I think that's particularly strong because there's a piece of legacy from that, which is that the staff or cohort of staff know how to use the tech, but also have some tangibles to refer to should they become stuck with how to use the lighting.
>
> Paul Lawless, Creative Practitioner

Creative practitioners stressed the importance of being able to speak directly to families and carers, celebrating the young people's work and having an opportunity to allay their concerns about encouraging their children to study the creative arts. They shared their perspective of coming from a working class background and reflected on the power of telling stories of their own personal journey. They talked openly about supporting themselves through various roles within and beyond the creative arts through the specific and transferable skills gained through their own learning journey. This reportedly seemed to resonate with parents as it was grounded and empathetic to Hartcliffe's context.

The timing of this residency brought about an unexpected opportunity for a final year university student undertaking a work placement with Brave Bold Drama to be involved in the residency facilitation. This also meant that young people were able to work with creative practitioners with a range of ages and experience levels, furthering opportunities for them to reflect on different career stages and opportunities for their own future.

Unexpected outcomes, challenges and further considerations

Working with these creative practitioners was deemed particularly powerful in helping students to potentially "see themselves" working in the theatre and creative industries in the future because their own experiences growing up resonated with the pupils and families. The Sutton Trust's (2024) report A Class Act[1] points out the stark inequalities for young people and adults from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and the significant barriers they face in accessing careers in the creative industries.

Families and carers at BLC are influential in choosing options at KS4 and for most, studying creative arts or working in the creative industries was not in their own experience and not necessarily seen as something that would set their children up for a stable career. Holding a Q&A and having opportunities for individual conversations with families and carers after the film screening was deemed particularly important in helping to reassure them that studying Drama at KS4 would open doors

Holt-White, E., O'Brien, D., Brook, O., & Taylor, M. (2024). A Class Act: Social Mobility and the Creative Industries. Sutton Trust. https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-class-act/

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not just to future study and work in the creative industries but also support students in multiple other aspects of their lives, whatever their career choices.

Transport for trips was noted by the BLC's Head of pupil engagement as a significant barrier to being able to take their pupils on trips, even though these opportunities are deemed important. Overcoming this barrier is one faced by multiple schools and something that needs to be given due consideration in funding bids. Within this residency, it was central to early conversations and planning. The bus tickets for young people to travel to and from Bristol Hippodrome were generously supplied by First Bus Group.

> The fact that we're working with the working class community and we're all working class facilitators and their kind of people, actually is hugely important because if there's so much parachuting in and there's so much art washing because there's only 8% of us. Most people that young people from working class communities engage with as creatives are not from that lived experience. And that's problematic if there's never ever any representation. So, I feel like that's a lot to do with why this was successful. We were able to, you know, talk in a room really openly with parents about, 'yeah, we get it, you want your kids to have safe income'. And Jen's saying, 'you know, when the work drops off, I'm a qualified electrician, I can go and rewire houses and I have this backup plan'. And, you know, all of these kind of like real world conversations that people who are coming from more privileged positions just won't feel comfortable holding.

Gill Simmons, Creative Practitioner

Six pupils were involved in the after-school club, although others appeared in the films. Young people in this community often face barriers to staying after school, including transport and caring roles they need to fulfil at home, as was the case here. The timing of clubs and other enrichment offers needs careful consideration if they are to target and be fully accessible to young people who would not get access to these creative opportunities otherwise. There are inevitable challenges and tensions with running them during the school day, but this would increase accessibility.

The workshops at Bottle Yard Studios and Bristol Hippodrome undertaken as part of this residency tapped into the offers from Get into Theatre, a charity with a mission to "promote access to the arts and specifically to theatre careers for all young people regardless of their background, circumstance or lived experience" (Get into Theatre website). Whilst they were already available and free to access, the focus on creative careers resulting from the residency provided the catalyst for these opportunities.

Working with these creative practitioners, who have knowledge of the scheme and connections locally has unlocked these opportunities. It highlights the value of external organisations working in partnership with schools and raises general questions about how partnerships are initiated and opportunities capitalised upon in the future given limited time, resources and funding in many schools and areas.

With the forthcoming introduction of the Drama BTEC in September 2026, the drama teacher is grateful for the opportunities for careers education that have been initiated

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through this residency and which are central to the qualification. She appreciated working alongside creative practitioners who understood her role and with whom she was able to have professional, subject-related conversations. This highlights the challenges of subject-specific support for teachers in minority subjects who are often one-person departments, and the important contribution that external partnerships and opportunities to work alongside other practitioners can make to their professional lives, connections and subject and pedagogic knowledge.

➤ The drama teacher is also Head of Year 9. This provided vital opportunities for her to engage with the whole year group on a regular basis and despite only teaching pupils for a rotational basis on the carousel, means that she knows all pupils pastorally and is known to them. Having support from senior staff who go beyond the subject realm is an important consideration if whole-school cultural change is sought.

➤ Challenges and frustrations around timetabling were noted from the school and creative practitioners during the process of this residency. Working with external partners in secondary schools requires flexibility from all, as seen in this residency, which had the added complexities associated with taking groups off-timetable and off-site. Nevertheless, the important value that the school and young people involved place on the opportunities afforded to them through this residency highlights the importance of working together to find amicable and workable solutions, as happened here.

➤ Like so many schools across the country, opportunities to take part in and study the performing arts at Bridge Learning Campus have been significantly diminished by the EBacc accountability measure, as candidly reflected upon by one of the school's senior leaders. This residency is credited with being central to building ambition, excitement and "bringing back the performing arts" at Bridge Learning Campus. There is much to think about here. BLC were already starting to reintroduce drama and invest, albeit on a carousel, in teaching Drama as a separate subject within their Key Stage 3 curriculum. It has the support of key members of the senior leadership team. But it was "doing something extraordinary" and beyond the reach of the school's own capacity and resourcing that piqued the interest of young people, and catalysed enough momentum and interest to re-start a course leading to a qualification. This is costly and resource heavy. In harder-to-reach communities, the Government's own data shows that access is the most limited, and yet, is considered by the school and in recent government policies and statements, to be vitally important, making this finding particularly timely.

➤ As shown through the residency at Bridge Learning Campus, Cultural Education Hubs are centrally positioned to allocate limited funding, connect organisations and ensure that programmes

> "Staff feedback was they didn't realise how confident a lot of the students were because they teach them in other subjects. When they saw them in the film, they were blown away."
>
> Liz Hackling, Head of Pupil Engagement

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> A highlight was the opportunity to speak with parents and be in a room with parents, for them to celebrate the work and the outcome, but also for us to hold space for a panel and then afterwards have an opportunity to have one-on-one conversations with some parents... for them to relay their thoughts and to ask questions and say thank you. That was really useful because although children often have a steer on what they do and what they pursue in terms of GCSE and A level or BTEC, sometimes it does take a bit of persuasion or it takes for the parents' horizons to be broadened a little bit for them to be like, 'oh, okay', it encompasses this and it's not as precarious because there's different pathways and it depends on what your pathway is or what part of that sector you pursue a career in. I think that, for me, was just really, really useful and essential. And that's what made this an extra success for me.

Paul Lawless, Creative Practitioner

are shaped ambitiously, planned meticulously and deliver against bespoke, well-defined and targeted objectives through embedding a strong accountability expectation alongside a reflective approach to honest and open evaluation.

Given the focus on careers education that is now a statutory expectation in all schools, this residency has shown the important role of a West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub as a conduit in connecting schools, creative practitioners and cultural organisations. As seen in this residency, WEMA's Cultural Education Hub facilitates partnership working and signposts existing programmes that support young people's engagement in the creative industries.

The inclusion of continuing professional development was also noted as a factor that provided a strong legacy from this residency. However, a reflection from participants in this research is that it is not present, or a requirement, in many programmes run by creative organisations in schools as the external funding constraint is often that the money is allocated for delivery to the target audience. A professional learning strand is built in as a requirement for all residencies funded by West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub and should be considered essential in other programmes in the future, which requires funding, time and resources to be allocated to this.

> For the [film-making] process, having that core small group, pretty much all of them, I think bar one, has picked Drama BTEC. And some of them I didn't think were going to choose it and they have because of this project.

Louise Saunders, Drama Teacher / Head of Year 9

> This time last year we didn't have a cohort large enough to run a Performing Arts or Drama BTEC and just by running this one project we now have a class of 30. So yeah, I think what it does for us is it brings back the performing arts. So that's a huge win.

Liz Hackling, Head of Pupil Engagement

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Brave Bold Drama
bravebolddrama.co.uk

Gill Simmons - Co-Artistic Director and Community Arts Producer

Gill has worked in theatre and drama all her life. After gaining an MA in Drama and Theatre Studies from Royal Holloway in 2001 she became a secondary drama teacher and worked in education until 2013. She set up Brave Bold Drama in 2013 and for a while worked solo a freelance drama practitioner, delivering workshops initially in children's centres, schools and care homes.

In 2015 Brave Bold Drama became a theatre company and has been a registered Community Interest Company since 2017. Gill writes music for the company's productions and is instrumental in devising new work. She oversees Brave Bold Drama's community and education projects.

Gill is a freelance performer, facilitator, producer, composer and musician. She has worked as a musical director for Kilter Theatre Company, composed for Knapsack Productions, performed for Bristol Improv Theatre and has produced for Soap Soup Theatre Company. She is trained to deliver all levels of Arts Award from Discover to Gold.

Laurie Morgan - Student placement

Laurie is a final year theatre and film undergraduate at the University of Bristol, completing a placement with Brace Bold Drama, supporting with marketing shows, and accompanying them with their arts certification programme.

Paul Lawless - Co-Artistic Director & Theatre Producer

Paul is an award-winning actor/deviser & singer. He has worked extensively as an actor over the past few years featuring in classical, new writing and devised theatre productions accompanying his facilitation work in drama & singing. As a workshop facilitator, he specialises in devising work for adults with learning disabilities.

Paul co-devises and performs with the company and manages the tours of all Brave Bold Drama shows, which includes Alf the Highwayman (2016), George & the Flight of the Imaginees (2017), Sticky Ends (2018), Wonderland (2019), The Munch Mission! (2021-2023) and The Midnight Mission! (2022-2023). Paul is an associate performer at Bristol Improv Theatre and also makes theatre as Frenetic Fox Theatre.

Jen Roxburgh - freelance lighting designer

Jen is an award-winning lighting designer who creates evocative visual atmospheres for theatre, music, and multimedia events across the UK and internationally. A former BBC Performing Arts "Ones to Watch" fellow, her extensive credits include collaborations with the National Theatre and English Touring Theatre, as well as innovative touring productions.

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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