

Exploring art, nature and outdoor learning as central to a new 'Creative, Relevant and Active for Twerton' curriculum



Photo Courtesy of Holly Dabbs

Twerton Nursey & Infant School
EYFS-KS1
Creative Practitioner: Holly Dabbs

Background to the school

Twerton Nursery and Infant School is a two-form mixed community school with an onsite nursery for 2 and 3-year-olds on the outskirts of Bath, North-East Somerset. 56% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals; 22% of pupils are eligible for SEN support. The school has a long-established reputation for being both inclusive and responsive to children's individual needs and is ambitious in its aspirations to set pupils up well now and in the future. Their primary aim is "to provide an environment where every child can develop, flourish and thrive". Central to this ambition is the development of their new CRAFT curriculum - Creative, Relevant and Active for Twerton - and they identified the "golden thread" throughout this new curriculum as developing children's speech and language skills. The KS1 curriculum is mapped out on a two-year cycle and the residency took place at the end of the first year of curriculum evolution.

Specific residency objectives:

- **To redesign the curriculum to embed and promote thinking and action that sparks children's inquisitiveness and imagination, utilising space inside and outside the classroom for promoting creative learning across the curriculum.**
- **To further embed and promote the development of speech and language skills across all aspects of school life at Twerton Nursery and Infant School.**
- **To support teachers to encourage playfulness and encourage creativity, through developing their own pedagogic repertoire and subject knowledge in the visual arts and take this into other subject areas in meaningful and worthwhile ways.**

Aims and synopsis for the residency

Having identified the ambition for deeper engagement with the arts and play-based, creative learning to sit centrally to their new CRAFT curriculum, Twerton Nursery and Infant school chose creative producer, participatory artist and forest school leader Holly Dabbs to work with them alongside their pupils, teachers and school leaders to explore the aims and aspirations defined above. Holly had previously delivered a one-off workshop at this school through another strand of funding from the West of England Cultural Hub.

During the summer term of 2025, Holly's residency at Twerton Infant School transformed the school's woodland area and outdoor space into an outdoor living classroom to encourage children's awe, wonder and curiosity in the natural environment. Each session involved working as an artist in different ways and with different media; storytelling was also woven through the residency. As Holly described: "Each session invited children to slow down and tune in to the world around them: noticing bird calls, collecting natural materials, and creating artworks inspired by trees, leaves, weather, and wildlife. From nature collages to muddy masterpieces, the woods became a backdrop for playful learning and quiet reflection." Every class worked with Holly on a rotational basis.

Holly also worked alongside the school's teachers, support staff and leadership both within the workshops with the children and also through bespoke staff planning and CPD sessions, supporting them in developing their understanding of ways to bring more creativity and exploration into their approaches and curriculum design.



Photo Courtesy of Holly Dabbs

The children's artwork produced through this residency was exhibited at Bath Spa University's Sion Hill campus in summer 2025, which parents and caregivers were invited to attend.

The children's questions, comments and conversations about the learning as it unfolded were noticed and documented by adults in the classroom. Photographs taken throughout the sessions and of the exhibition also formed a lasting impression of the work. Holly delivered a total of 9 workshops and 1 teacher CPD session over 2 months, engaging 118 students across the whole school and 15 teachers.

“ The vision is to enable the constraints of the National Curriculum to be taught in the most inclusive and creative way possible. I think for us it was a vision initially, and it's becoming more of a reality. I think there's obviously still room for growth... thinking what other things we can be taking outdoors and teaching in a creative way. It's given a really, really good basis for that progression. ”

Astral Blanchard, Head of School

Key outcomes

Young people

➤ Children were excited and inspired by learning in different spaces and also exploring the natural world through a wide range of artistic processes. The playful and exploratory nature of the sessions, particularly at the start of the residency, provided multiple planned opportunities for children to have sensory experiences that many had not previously had; this was deemed important in helping scaffold their later opportunities to continue to think and act like an artist.

➤ Being outdoors and learning in ways that were structured and had freedom for children to explore led to multiple opportunities for talk to happen. This led to a noticeable increase in 'chatter' in other areas of school life and learning situations.

“ They've been able to access the sessions in a way that we've never seen. With one particular child ... he was not able to engage in the same way in a classroom and to be able to see the potential that's there in those kind of sessions and knowing that if we tweak the way we're teaching him, we will unlock that learning potential ..., that will form part of our understanding of similar children in the future ... It's just given that extra layer of understanding to children that need a different style of teaching. ”

Astral Blanchard, Head of School

➤ For children with speech and language challenges and those with English as additional language, the practical and creative nature of the work through the residency meant that they were able to fully access the learning; as described by the Deputy Head, the experiences offered through the residency 'unlocked learning' for them.

➤ The different ways of learning also led to some pupils being able to engage and achieve who had previously struggled in a classroom environment for a variety of reasons. As an infant school, pupils move to another school at the end of Year 2, but the strategies that the staff noticed were impactful will be useful to them for engaging other pupils in the future.

➤ Children's artistic engagement expanded as they explored new materials and ways of working, and the scaffolded activities gave opportunities for all to be successful and able to develop their own artistic flair individually and collaboratively.



Photo Courtesy of Holly Dabbs

Staff

➤ The school's deputy Headteacher/ curriculum leader (now the Head of School) identified the importance of meeting in advance of the residency to plan the work and for the school and creative practitioner to understand each other's perspectives and priorities throughout the process. Regular reflection meetings were crucial to this.

“ People have that confidence now ... But I think without being able to invest that time in such expert modelling that wouldn't have come, that's not something you can just do by going 'hey guys, come and watch one lesson' ... They have to learn by doing themselves ... you are so adaptable Holly and you've got all these different strategies that you've modelled that can get attention in different ways, or gather the children back together in different ways, or transforming that space with very limited resources, very simple ideas. ... And I think you've just given all the staff a toolkit of ideas that they can draw upon now ... So that is the impact on the children; the upskilling of the adults plus their understanding using the space in a different way. ”

Astral Blanchard, Head of School

➤ The professional development that took place through the residency was planned around areas noticed and identified by the curriculum leader, individual staff members and the creative artist. This meant that it could be targeted to individual aspirations, priorities, strengths and needs, which supported the development of confidence in pedagogic practices that were previously less familiar.

Holly led a whole-school CPD at the end of the residency which was well received and provided opportunities for staff to reflect on what they had actually seen, observed and done, and it is drawing upon these rich first-hand experiences that was most powerful.

➤ The scaffolded approach to professional learning, working alongside Holly, having opportunities for professional conversations through the process and co-planning and co-delivery promoted this space for thinking and adaptation. This led to noticeable adaptations to practice in other areas of the curriculum.

➤ Co-planning the sessions also ensured that the diverse needs of all children could be catered for as the class teachers and TAs have a lot of knowledge about children in their classes. Nevertheless, giving the autonomous decisions to the creative practitioner about the content, process and delivery was deemed as central to the success by both the Head and the artist.

➤ Holly's work modelled to the teachers the great potential of using the outside space in a multitude of ways and the simplicity of the ideas led to more teachers feeling able to both try out simple ideas themselves in their teaching and also utilise a variety of outdoor spaces more.



Photo Courtesy of Holly Dabbs



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➤ Having a residency rather than one-off sessions allowed for the teachers to experience a wide range of often less familiar practices and media for making and creating art with their classes. Giving the children time and space for their own creativity and individuality within the learning meant that the ownership of the art was left with the pupils and they were all supported and scaffolded to achieve as appropriate to them. This is something that some teachers and adults in supporting children found impactful for thinking about future learning and the balance between teacher-led and pupil-led learning, as well as the role of the teacher as facilitator.

➤ The iterative nature of the process over time allowed for flexibility and adaptation between each session, giving Holly the freedom to reflect with the teachers and children on the process as it unfolded and to plan the next session based on the learning unfolding, rather than for it to be pre-planned, whilst still based on the curriculum goals in terms of what she wanted them to experience and the final outcome.

This was noticed by some of the teachers and served as a mirror for them to reflect on their own practices, approaches and roles.

➤ This experiential way of learning, and the focus on slowing down and giving pupils and teachers time and space to notice the world around them, encouraged a focus and priority to be given to the process of learning, rather than the outcome. It also took away the pressure of what children often see as the black and white nature of learning being "right" or "wrong".

Creative Practitioner

➤ Working with the children over a period of time and gaining the support of the other adults in the room through the planning and delivery meant that the creative practitioner was able to become more embedded in the school, its culture and practices and to support children and adults to take creative risks.

➤ The creative practitioner appreciated being part of the team and utilising the deep knowledge of the pupils that was held by the other adults in the room. The creative practitioner recognised the need to maintain flexibility in her delivery rather than planning it all out at the beginning.

“ [The residency] meant that I can explore particular methods of art making in a really in-depth way because it's not a one off. So for example, like the storytelling element of the sessions, because it wasn't a one-off performance I could actually engage with the children because I knew them. So there was much more of an exchange with the children. ”

Holly Dabbs , Creative Artist

Unexpected outcomes, challenges and further considerations

- The exhibition at Bath Spa University gave a real-life purpose to the children’s artistic endeavours and continued the sense of authentically working as an artist. Being a school with a high percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals indicates the economic challenges for many local families and the potential barrier for families to be able to visit the exhibition.
- The co-creation of the work contributed to the sense of pride and ownership felt by the pupils. There is much to think about in relation to weaving opportunities for co-creation and bringing in children’s own ideas and voices more into the curriculum.
- Turning a vision into a reality requires commitment to change and action, alongside a belief in the vision and feelings of ownership and autonomy over the changes. This residency set the wheels in motion for the curriculum evolution to become a reality. The school leadership has reflected very positively on this whilst candidly noting the need for this to continue and the potential that they see in developing staff and the curriculum per se side-by-side.

- During year two of the curriculum redevelopment, staff will continue to work in curriculum teams and be encouraged to proliferate flexible creative approaches that capture the awe and wonder of the residency across the curriculum. Books and texts have been chosen with this aspiration in mind.
- Having a residency at such a pivotal point in the curriculum development was considered hugely beneficial for helping the staff across the school to articulate the vision and see that it could work. The school’s leadership were grateful for the opportunities to work with such an experienced artist and educator.
- Whilst the learning went both ways, it does raise questions for other schools and settings about how to support more artists to gain such deep experiences in formal educational settings in the future, and to encourage teachers with an artistic background and interest to bring authentic artistic practices more into the foreground in their teaching and support of other colleagues.
- As an infant school, pupils leave at the end of Year 2 to go to another school. Managing and supporting the transition between schools is important and ensuring that the changes to curriculum focus and approaches is articulated to the feeder schools is something that Twerton Nursery and Infant School continue to prioritise; this year has seen a big change in both the curriculum and the learning modalities, behaviours, values and attitudes to learning displayed by the pupils, to which the residency has reportedly greatly contributed.



Photo Courtesy of Holly Dabbs



“ The biggest change for staff and for children, I would say is engagement. The engagement of the children has been completely different this year to previous years and, really interestingly, we're working quite closely with St Michael's [feeder junior school] at the moment because they inherit a lot of our children from year 2 into year 3 and they cannot believe the difference in the cohort of children that are going up this year. And I know cohorts are different, but if we look at the journey this particular year 2 have been on it's been phenomenal. They love learning. They really do and you know that they're not passive learners. They're engaged learners that are working together, collaborating, problem solving, using teamwork, questioning and it's all the kind of things that you want to be seeing because we're giving them that chance to be more creative, more physical in their learning, much less passive.

But I think also it's enabling teachers to be more creative practitioners and that has changed the level of engagement of the adults as well. The team feels very strong and very together and that's such a nice feeling because this is what you want, isn't it?

Astral Blanchard, Head of School

Watch a discussion with Astral Blanchard, Head of School, and Holly Dabbs about the project:



Holly Dabbs:

Holly is a Creative Producer, Participatory Artist, and Forest School leader. She has worked with schools, galleries and museums across the country to create creative, engaging and collaborative learning opportunities. Her work has led her to work with museums and galleries collaborating with organisations such as Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, National Trust, Bath Abbey and The Bath Preservation Trust.

As the founder of Foxglove Forest School, Holly provides wonderful outdoor, nature based sessions for early years children and their families. Running engaging events in schools and community settings in Bath and London.

hollydabbs.com

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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