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Teachers who write themselves can boost children's confidence in creative writing

Giving teachers time and support to become creative writers has helped them motivate their students, according to the findings of a two-year research project looking at Arvon's work with teachers.

Even teachers fully trained to teach English can feel ill-assured as writers. But academics have found working with authors can help them make changes to their practice and curriculum which can benefit children.

A group of teachers from the South West spent time on a residential course led by professional poets and novelists, developing their own writing style. The aim was to encourage teachers to see themselves as writers, not just people who have to teach writing in the classroom. Analysis shows these teachers then made more room for writing in the curriculum, giving students more time and space to be creative. This resulted in students showing greater levels of motivation and confidence to write.

The course was led by Arvon. The research was led by Professor Teresa Cremin of The Open University and Professor Debra Myhill and Dr Anthony Wilson of The University of Exeter, and funded by a grant from Arts Council England (ACE). The project, called Teachers as Writers (TAW), sought to investigate in what ways teachers' engagement with professional writers might influence their classroom practice in the teaching of writing, and whether it improves student outcomes in writing.

A total of 16 teachers who teach Key Stage 2 and 3 in disadvantaged areas in the region spent a week writing in April 2016, mentored by professional writers. They continued to be mentored by the writers after, co-planning, co-teaching, and reflecting together on a unit of work taught in the summer of 2016. The writers included Carnegie Award-winning children's author Tanya Landman and Booker long-listed novelist Wyl Menmuir.

Analysis of the teachers' practice afterwards show they then made more time and space for creative writing not connected to assessment in the writing process and paid more attention to students as writers and to revising. Their work was compared to a control group of teachers who had not taken part in the course.

Professor Cremin said: "Through freeing up space and time for writing, the teachers developed more awareness of their students as writers and their rights as writers. This influenced the young people's pleasure and engagement in writing but it raises questions about integrating such practice into a highly structured skills-based writing curriculum."

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Becky Swain, Head of Learning and Participation, Arvon, said: “Working alongside professional writers as co-mentors, teachers have been nurturing students’ enjoyment of writing, giving them more space and time to write for themselves. Many of the teachers have been writing alongside students in class for the first time, and both teachers and students have begun to appreciate more and more that writing can be an activity to be enjoyed together, including all the fits and starts and challenges along the way.”

One Year 9 teacher said: “The course and mentoring has taught me a lot about what is actually important and what is important is that children write. If you can get them to want to write, enjoy it and feel passionately about it, then all the rest of it you can filter in afterwards.”

A Year 8 student said: “The whole classroom has become more relaxed...you can share ideas and feedback...help each other and it’s less competitive.”

More details of the research, including an Executive Summary available for download, can be found at www.teachersaswriters.org

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