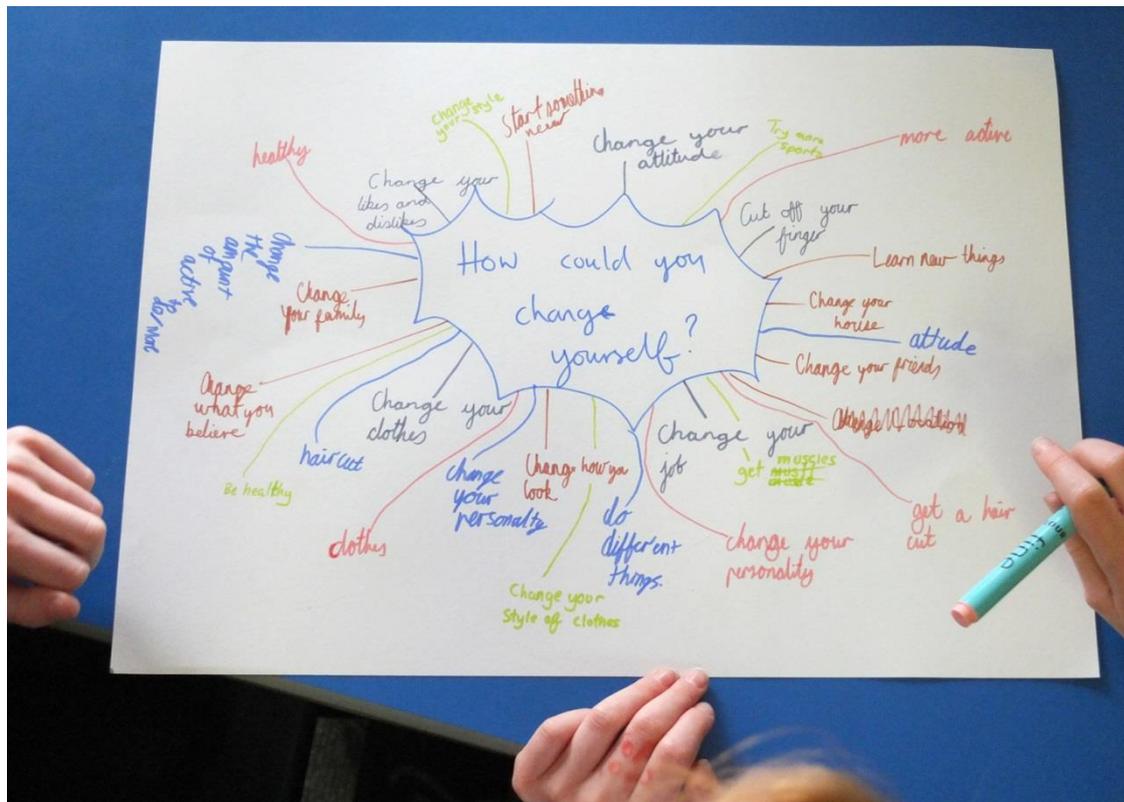


# Raising attainment through pupil engagement

A report of an experiment



Falkirk Council



CLACKMANNANSHIRE  
COUNCIL



ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL



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## Executive Summary

Two creative practitioners collaborated with six teachers and more than 80 pupils in two primary schools over the space of 8 months on a research project with three aims:

- We wanted to know how creativity could enhance pupil engagement in the primary school classroom.
- We wanted to better understand what occurs when pupils take an active role in proposing, developing and deciding the focus and practicalities of their own learning.
- Additionally we wanted to explore how teachers react and respond to enhanced pupil agency.

The project was informed by research linking enhanced pupil participation in school with greater achievement & attainment. With the agreement of teachers and senior management, the project gave pupils the freedom to discuss, reflect, and act on their own ideas. Through the concepts and questions emerging from the pupils themselves, the creative practitioners were able to harness this authentic sense of purpose within the classroom to gently coach the pupils in the situated performance of skills and knowledge spanning key curricula areas. The pupils voluntarily and happily chose to use maths, science, history, geography, languages, and ICT to explore solutions to their own questions.

*“Yeah [is learning fun ‘proper learning’?] Kind of. Because you feel like you want to do more. If you’re playing a computer game, and its fun, so you want to go back to it and complete it. So if you did that with maths you’d want to back and complete that*

We (the creative practitioners) witnessed pupils enthusiastically seizing the opportunities afforded by their enhanced agency and equality with adults in influence over the learning process. We saw a natural social order emerge quickly between the pupils, who appeared to regulate their own behaviour through majority agreement and peer pressure. During the project, adults were not required to intervene over any serious behavioural issues.



We witnessed teachers react to the project differently to the pupils. Most were uncomfortable with their temporary loss of control. Some responded positively to the changes in their classrooms, attempting to assume the role of facilitator and collaborator in the learning process instead of the leader, others restored a familiar hierarchical order to their classroom and the school-day at the earliest opportunity.

The research findings indicate that pupils are naturally capable of rising to the responsibilities of enhanced agency. There are possibilities for further research exploring how much influence and power in strategic and operational matters can be shared with pupils, by teachers and educational managers. Perhaps the most significant finding in terms of identifying key areas for further research into participation, achievement and attainment in schools lies in exploring teachers' perceptions of the situational constraints affecting their practice, and how they can be supported to develop progressive strategies to meet the pedagogical challenges facing the profession at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Context

The design of curricula and pedagogy can no longer be anchored to the knowledge of the class teacher alone. How can children and young people's experience of education best prepare them for a **future** that defies prediction, and to ensure they achieve their full potential?

A future world full of **uncertainty** demands learners must be equipped with higher-order creativity skills that, as Education Scotland suggests: *will help children and young people not just understand the world, but be sufficiently equipped to influence its shape.*

We believe one method of raising attainment is through increased pupil engagement. To achieve this learning and teaching must inspire and develop imagination, innovation, independence and collaboration, curiosity, self-discipline, resilience, risk taking, problem solving and critical thinking.

All this can be summarised with one word: **creativity**.

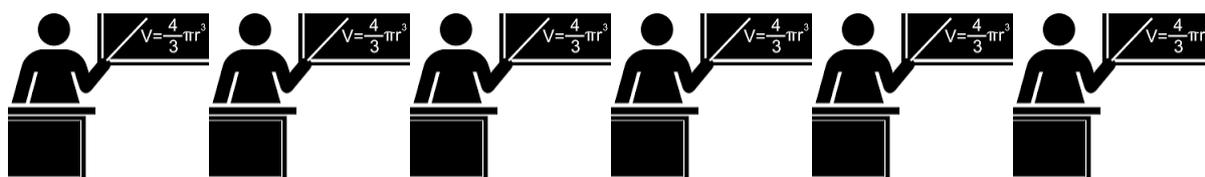
Our understanding of creativity is one's ability to demonstrate flexibility and **resilience** in approach to challenges. However, the term can be seen as malleable and individual which therefore makes it troublesome when demonstrating it to others. The quick fix or resource pack to making something or someone 'more creative' is impossible without active participation and meaningful self-reflection.

Through 2014/15 (as part of Forth Valley Creative Learning's programme) we worked with Menstrie Primary School in Clackmannanshire and St Ninians Primary in Stirling. This work was led by creative **practitioners** and educators Paul Gorman and Matthew Sowerby.

To understand how creativity enhances pupil agency and engagement would therefore involve research into an individual's application of it. This action-based research project created an **intervention** to assist our understanding of what happens when creativity is actively applied in a classroom.

The intervention consisted of a full day spent working with an identified class and their teacher to explore how the **curriculum** could be delivered by starting with a simple question: 'What is an experiment?' The teacher was asked not to prepare anything to ensure the learning was situated and unplanned for which would result in an honest collaboration between practitioner, teacher and pupils.

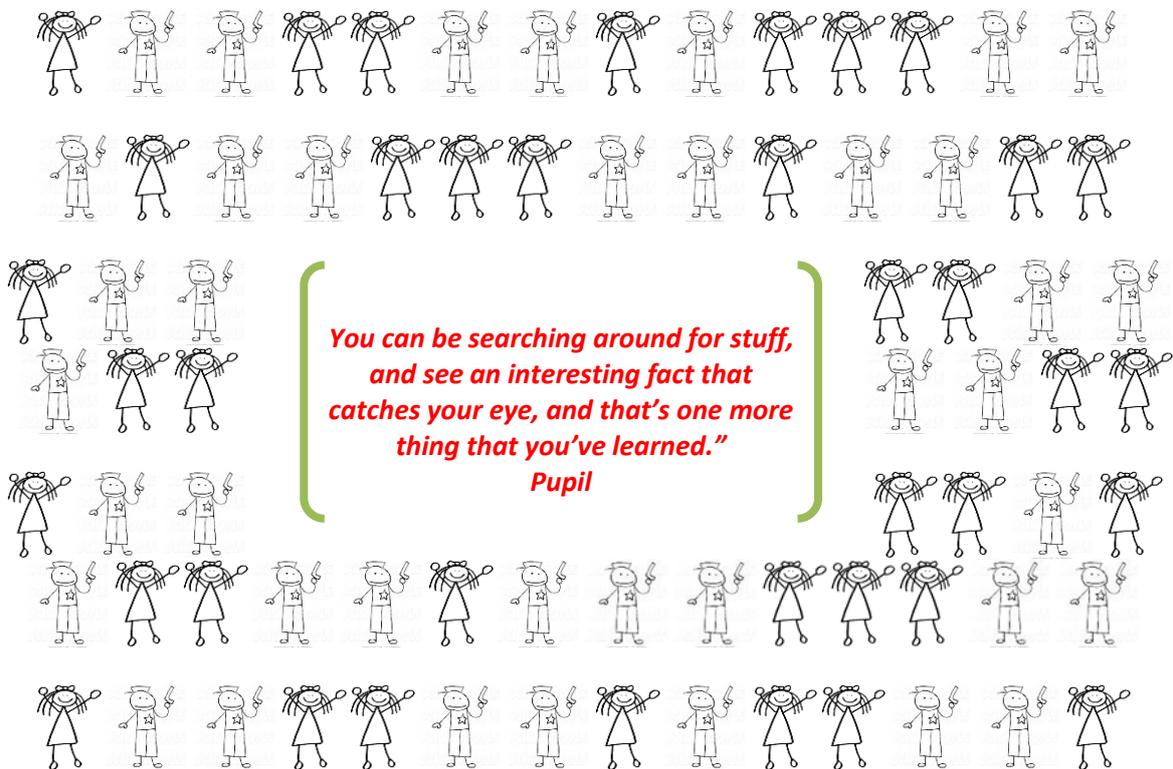
We carried out 4 separate experiments with 4 different age groups and then a series of reflection days to explore the **impact** of the day on pupils and teachers. The research findings have been collated and compiled into this final report.



We collaborated with 6 teachers

# Research Aims

- We wanted to know how creativity could enhance pupil engagement in the primary school classroom.
- We wanted to better understand what occurs when pupils take an active role in proposing, developing and deciding the focus and practicalities of their own learning.
- Additionally we wanted to explore how teachers react and respond to enhanced pupil agency.



We worked with over 80 primary school pupils

# Structure

Day one: Introductions. We visited the school and spoke with the Head Teacher, senior management, staff and pupils. We arrived at a mutually agreed set of dates and participants.



Day two: Intervention: The day would involve an 'experiment'. The children, teacher and researchers would not plan ahead but instead pay attention to what emerged. The intervention simply started with the question "What is an experiment?" The day would be co-facilitated between the researchers and teacher:

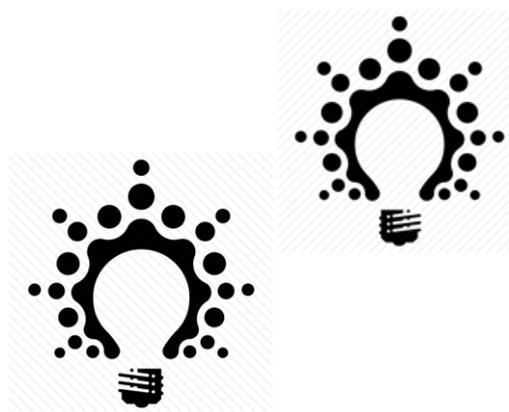
9.00 - 10.30am	Break	10.45 -12.30pm	Lunch	1.30 - 2.30pm	2.30 - 3.30pm
Researchers, pupils and class teacher		Class teacher and pupils		Researchers, pupils and class teacher	Class teacher and pupils



Day three: Unpacking interviews. We talked to staff and pupils about the intervention day, making audio recordings of the conversations. Pairs of pupils were invited to take the researchers for a walk around the school. These 'walk-along' interviews enabled the pupils to talk more informally as they guided the researchers around their school, in the role of local 'experts'. A more formal focus group interview brought all the pupils together around a table, to provide an additional opportunity to capture thoughts and responses, and additionally affording the pupils the feeling of participating formally in the interview process. Conversations with staff were recorded in a space of their choosing.

*"It made us think differently...I'm really interested in how you started from nothing... in this complicated age... keep it simple... But we've got a show on the road, like a supertanker, y'know. You can't easily turn it".*

*Teacher*



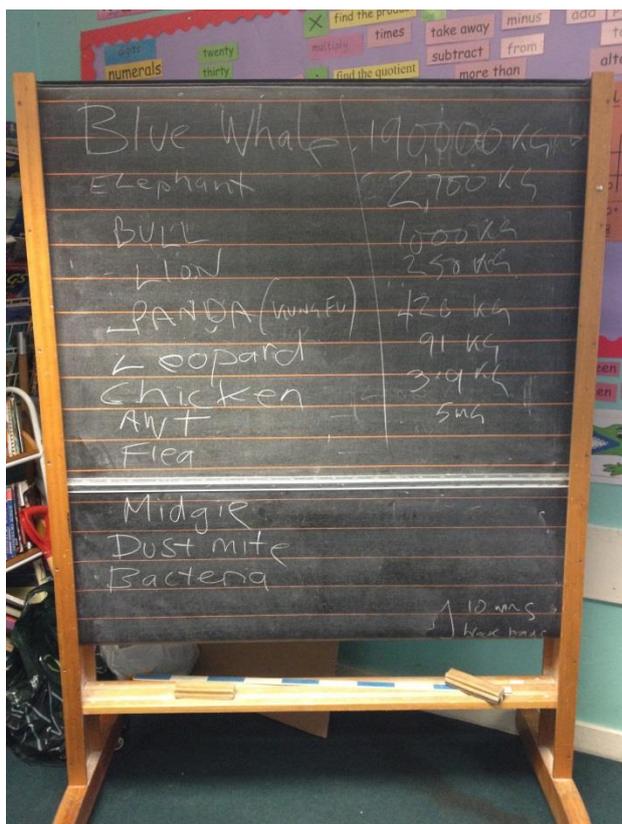
Two creative practitioners

# Intervention Days

We observed three key areas of learning and teaching emerge from the days:

## Situated/Listening:

We chose to begin with 'Listening'. We wanted to listen to what the participants – particularly pupils had to say when given the space and time to talk without a pre-determined agenda or curriculum. The 'main resources' for this intervention project would be the pupils themselves – their knowledge, skills, inquisitively and playfulness.



## Attentive:

Our research was influenced by Tim Ingold's ideas about the key differences between intensive and attentive practice (1). Intensive practice is the implementation of plans prepared in advance, whereas attentive practitioners attend – freely and openly - to what actually happens. We deliberately chose not to bring any physical resources into the classrooms we worked in. Instead we drew upon what was already there, considering resources to be more than material objects.

## Immersive:

In this research we wanted to dissolve the separation between teachers and pupils by reorienting them as co-participants. We felt it was vital to attend to long-standing concerns within education about power inequalities. Educational research is often an act 'done to' children and young people - by adults - rather than an equitable collaborative, exploratory process in which children can contribute freely and with potency (2).

(1) Ingold, Tim (2006) 'Making' , Routledge, London

(2) Punch, Sam (2002) *Research with Children* in: *Childhood* Vol. 9(3): 321-341

## Summary

Repeatedly, in different schools we witnessed pupils fully engage enthusiastically in working towards solutions for problems and challenges that they were able to develop and action by themselves. In our intervention sessions, the pupils required only the lightest of pedagogical scaffolding, and on some occasions – needed no adult help at all.

- Pupils discussed change – what can be changed and what can't. This extended from self-evaluation of their own identities, into conversations and activities exploring environmentalism, causes of poverty, political ideology, war and capitalism.
- Pupils redesigned their schools, in terms of physical spaces and modes of attendance. They wanted more 'Golden Time' – to play together, and more autonomy – in terms of adult-free spaces.
- Pupils decide to "invent what needed inventing". Excited by one pupil's suggestion, the whole class designed their own remote control device for children to make adults do what they wanted. Alongside the technical considerations, we discussed the moral and ethical implications of this power.



8 months

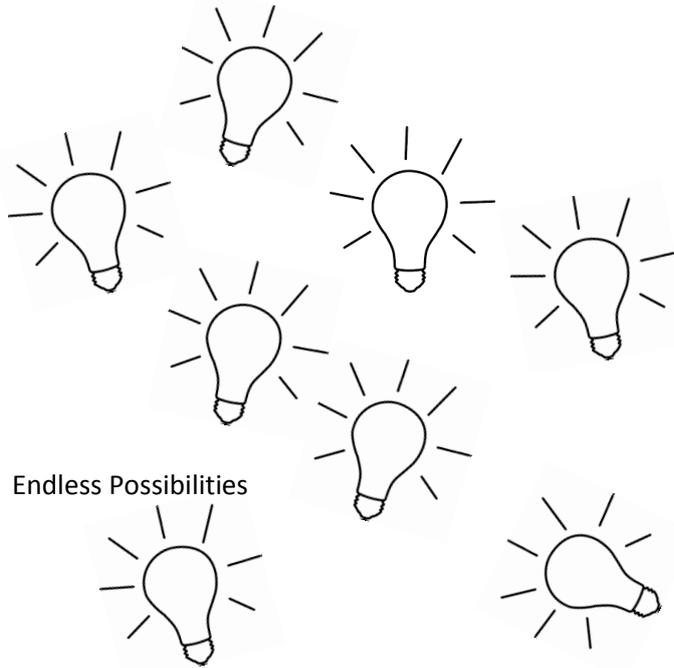
### ***Pupil Agency***

*We found that pupils responded positively to their enhanced agency to direct and shape their own learning. In all the classrooms we worked in, we observed a natural social order emerging amongst the pupils after an initial, excited period of chatter. The pupils naturally gravitated from talking, listening and reflecting, towards wanting to action their ideas.*



### ***External pressures***

*Some teachers reflected on their own teacher training and recalled discussions about facilitating enhanced pupil agency, but spoke of a collective conservatism within schools. Invited to explain more, some teachers described an institutionalised sensitivity to risk, and to parental pressure. The impact of parental pressure and expectations projected on to schools is an issue we are not able to address in this research, but presents an area for future investigation.*



Endless Possibilities

### **Freeing up the Curriculum**

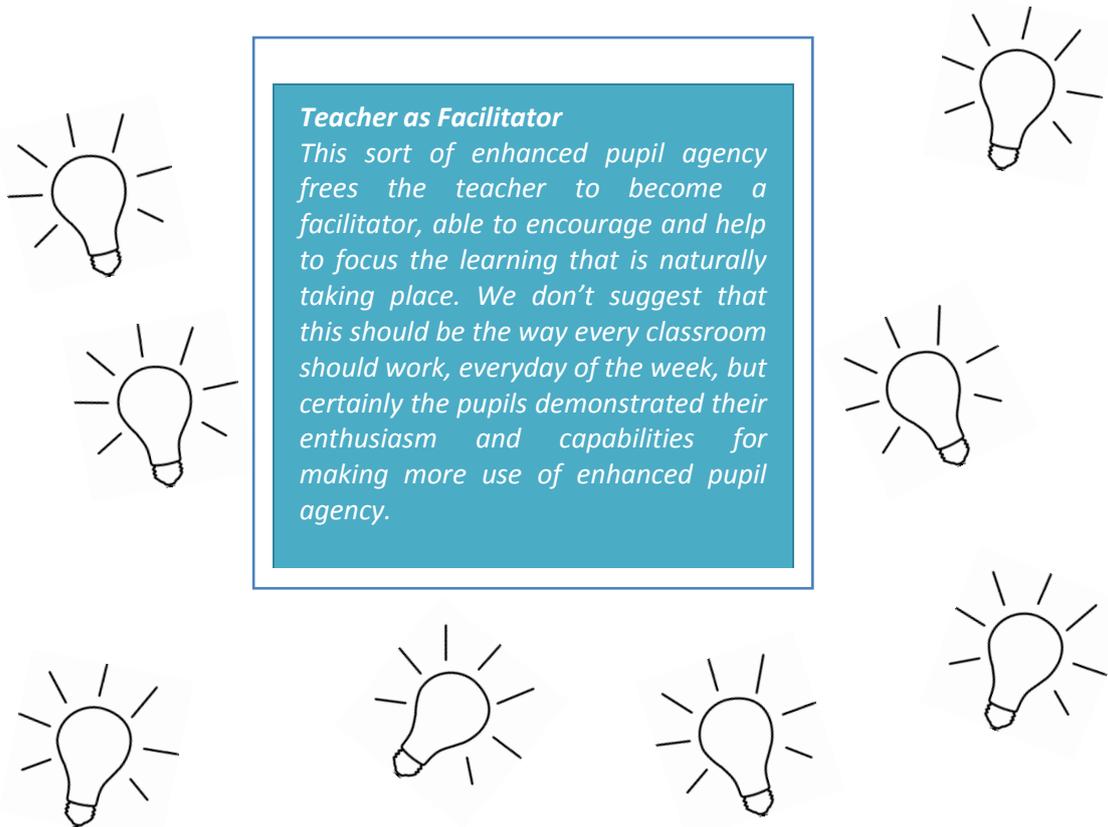
*Pupils told us they enjoyed the freedom our interventions afforded them. They explained in their own words that they felt listened to and able to influence what happened, and the pace of events. They also explained that these weren't common occurrences in school, and that they would like more of them.*

### **Teacher's personal development**

*All the teachers told us they found the uncertainty that our interventions brought to be initially disconcerting. Most felt a challenge to their authority in the classroom and a loosening of their control over the direction of learning. We experienced differing degrees of openness to this change, and on occasions forthright opposition. Some teachers attempted to work (attentively) with what emerged from the pupils in session they led that immediately followed-on our intervention.*

### **Teacher as Facilitator**

*This sort of enhanced pupil agency frees the teacher to become a facilitator, able to encourage and help to focus the learning that is naturally taking place. We don't suggest that this should be the way every classroom should work, everyday of the week, but certainly the pupils demonstrated their enthusiasm and capabilities for making more use of enhanced pupil agency.*

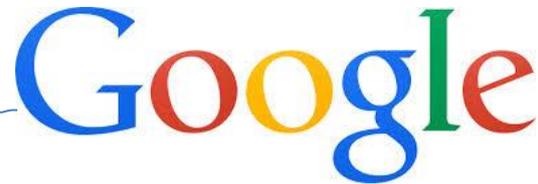


## Case Study: Just Google it

Pupils in one school asked what was the heaviest animal, which in turn led to a debate arbitrated by the pupils themselves about whether the list included or excluded sea creatures (Google confirmed this to be a blue whale). Then, in the time and adult-free space our experiment afforded pupils to explore, the questions evolved into challenges Google couldn't meet: "What is the most confident animal? Is a polar bear more confident than an ant?"



This led to the enthusiastic, collaborative construction of another collectively arbitrated hierarchical list, this time around the highly nebulous concept of perceived animal confidence. "Is an elephant more confident than an ant?" The pupils were notably unfazed by a question with no answer. "Is Google a boy or girl?", someone asked. A young boy was quick to tell the group that, "Google is obviously a boy, because if it was a girl it would make more mistakes". Google sparked much interest and debate, with the pupils thoroughly enjoying discussing and sharing their experience of exploring its possibilities and limitations – in their homes and at school.



P1: "We should just ask it what we're having for tea tomorrow. It wouldn't know that".

Keen to beat Google, pupils came up with the question, "How many blades of grass are there in the world?" Collectively, we attempted to devise strategies for calculating a satisfactory answer to the grass question - a challenge that had come completely from the pupils themselves. In the pursuit of an answer, together we were able to purposefully situate maths, geography, geology, languages, and science: "count individual blades", or estimate the amount of grass in a square meter and "multiply by the number of square meters in the world", or 'just burn it all'. The pupils fully engage in working towards solutions for problems and challenges which emerged from their free-flowing discussion.



P1: "A new blade of grass grows every second so by the time we finished counting, there would be more."

P2: "...and grass also grows in gutters".

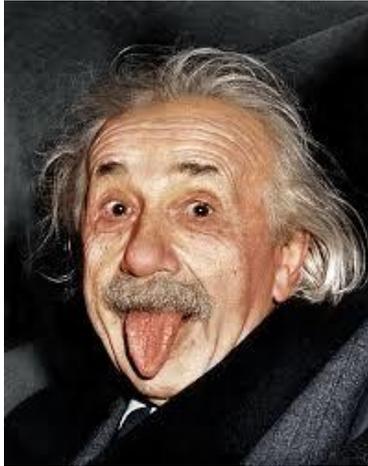
We discovered that the grass question and resulting activities had stuck firmly in the memories of the pupils when we returned to talk to them several weeks later.

Int: Why do you remember the grass question?

P1: Because it was exciting. It was an unusual question. Because the answer changes.

We witnessed the pupils thrive in opportunities to engage in philosophical debate as they regularly came up with questions that were difficult or impossible to answer 'correctly':





Int: *Isn't it a waste of time to chase around at school after questions that you can't answer?*

P: *Sometimes you come out with more knowledge.*

Int: *Compared to what?*

P: *You can be searching around for stuff, and see an interesting fact that catches your eye, and that's one more thing that you've learned.*

The pupils were articulating their understanding of collateral learning and arrived at similar conclusions to John Dewey, some 100 years earlier:

P1: *Even Einstein said school was boring. He said it teaches you meaningless facts.*

Int: *Where did you learn that? In School?*

P1: *No. Wikipedia. And I found it in a comic book where a guy interviews dead people.*

And the pupils indicated their awareness of the endless enormous possibilities offered by learning collaboratively and collegially from each other:

P2: *"It's like football. You could ask Messi how you do the tricks. The manager might not know – because he's not playing the football, he can't do all the tricks, but the manager's in charge of Messi.*



## Conclusions

We believe this research has highlighted the impact creativity has on pupil engagement and as a result could support schools to enhance attainment and achievement.

Throughout each of the four interventions we witnessed pupils highly engaged in imaginative, philosophical and collaborative learning. Much of the work that arose from the questions far surpassed the presumed level of ability of that particular class. The pupils very quickly realigned their behaviour to work within this new model. They thrived on the freedom and increased agency to create a vibrant and highly engaged classroom.

In evaluation, pupils told us that during the periods when they had more input they felt they had had fun, but also that they had definitely been learning. However, some were quick to add that they thought their teachers might not agree. Fun in the learning process mirrors the autonomy that pupils enjoy during periods of play, in particular, the universally popular 'golden-time'. During this lightly supervised child-led activity at the end of the school week, pupils largely self-regulate their own behaviour through majority agreement and peer pressure, as they collaborate with enthusiasm, curiosity and imagination in activities of their own device and choosing.

*One lad said, "This was a good day for us – but probably not a good day for you (the teacher)", and when pushed about it further, he said, "because we didn't do any work". So maybe they didn't get that what was happening was that they were learning - they were creating and being engaged - because they see work as a more formal experience for them.... You saw straight away how engaged they*

We also recognise the challenges the model presented to the classroom teacher. Many struggled with the relaxing of classroom rules and authority. We noted the frustration of not having a known or fixed plan when engaging their class in activity. The role of facilitator or practitioner was not adopted easily.

Teachers told us that they recognised the pupils' high levels of enthusiasm and engagement with the aims of the project, and expressed interest in the rapid emergence of pupil-mediated social order within the classroom. However, almost all the teachers explained their reluctance to offer more agency to pupils in pedagogy and curricula, citing concerns over risk and accountability through the evidential exposure of performance indicators and inspections.

The research indicates a prolonged engagement with teachers is needed to ensure meaningful continuing professional development. Building on the work within the test schools we propose a training programme is established to connect to the findings of the research.



Two Schools