The Forgotten News Desk - Research & Development

Notes and reflections, October 2021

Outline of the project

The Forgotten News Desk Research & Development, funded by the Ragdoll Foundation, was a period of activity designed to re-connect us, Filament Projects, with our audience, local primary school-aged children, and explore ideas with them to inform the development of The Forgotten News Desk, a new immersive theatre project to be deliver in schools during Spring 2022.

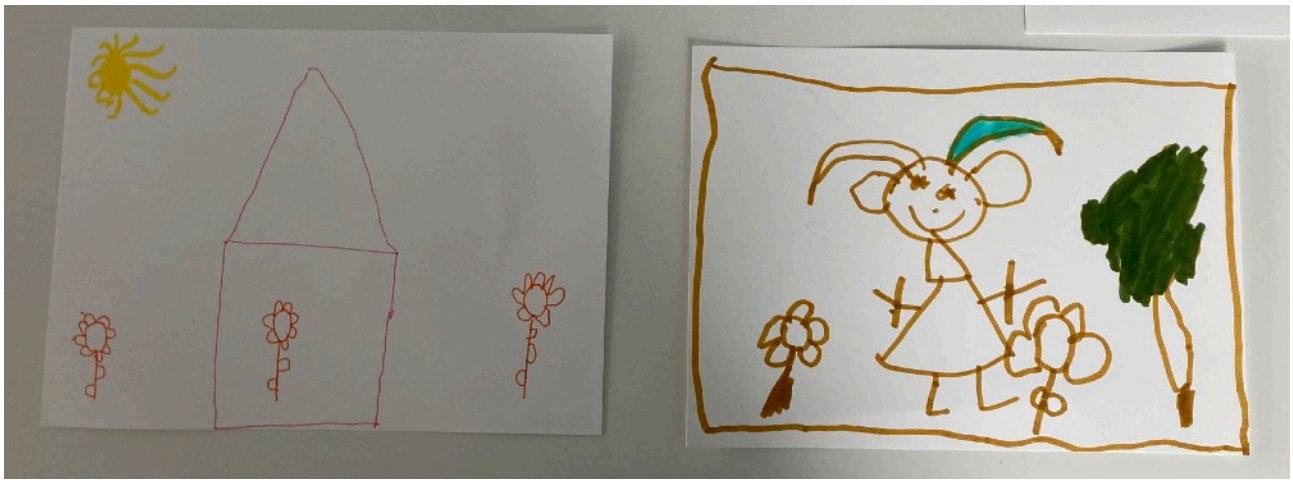
Working in partnership with children and staff at Dee Point Primary School in Blacon, near Chester, we led a series of creative workshops and conversations which explored and helped us to better understand children's feelings about writing as a means of expression, both in school and during their own time, plus what they feel they need to have around them in order to be creative.

Practical in-school creative workshops led by designer Rachel Shore and writer & poet Gabriella Gay explored questions such as 'Where do you have your best ideas?' and 'Can words change the world?'. Focus group-style conversations with each year group enabled us to listen as children discussed how they felt about writing and shared examples of the types of writing they do outside of school and why. And an after-school INSET session with teaching staff gave us an insight into the work being done in school to raise children's aspirations and how The Forgotten News Desk might feed into and compliment this work.

Below are examples of the children's ideas, thoughts and feedback from the practical workshops plus some thoughts and reflections from some of the artists involved in leading the workshops, all of which will feed into the development of The Forgotten News Desk, helping to ensure it is a project which is relevant to children's lives and truly representative of their ideas and experiences.

Filament Projects, www.wearefilament.co.uk

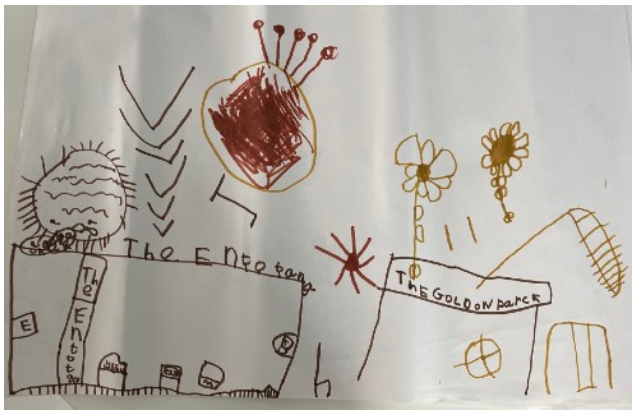
Design workshops with spatial designer Rachel Shore



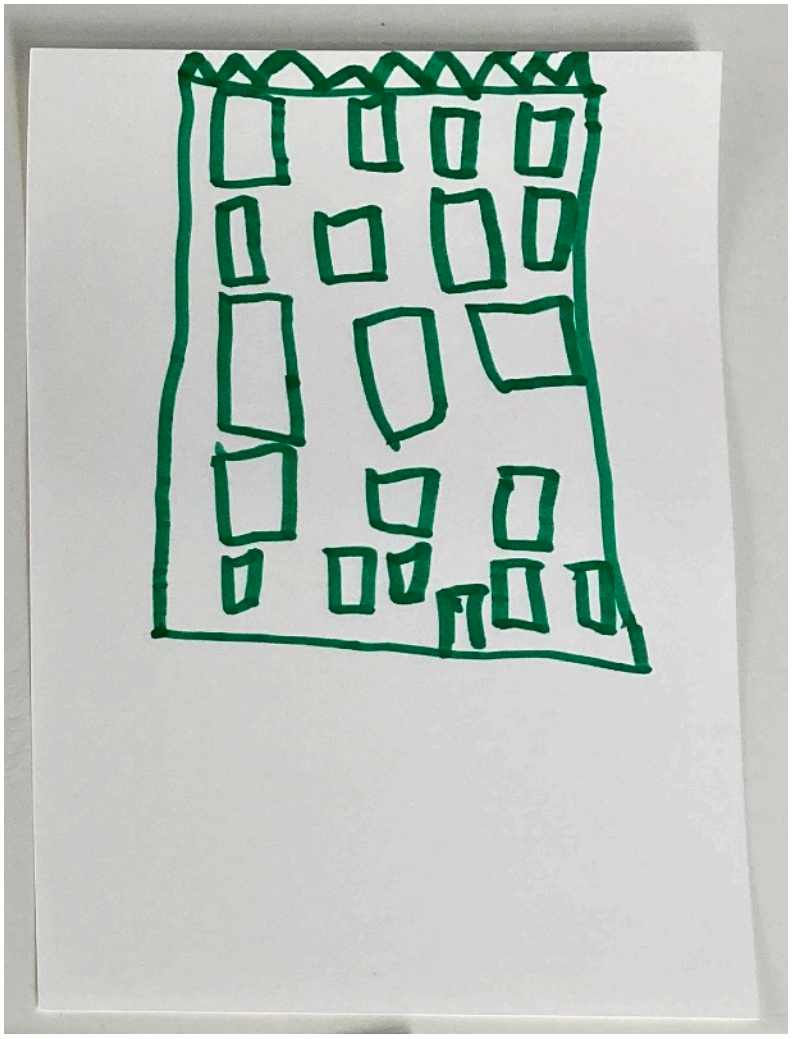
These were practical sessions during which Rachel invited children to consider where they need to be and what they need to have around them in order to have their best ideas. Examples of famous people's creative spaces eg. Roald Dahl's writing hut and Frida Kahlo's bed were shared to encourage the children to think about their own creative needs. The children explored and shared their thoughts through a series of drawing exercises, both individually and in groups.

Individual drawings in response to the question 'Where do you have your best ideas?'

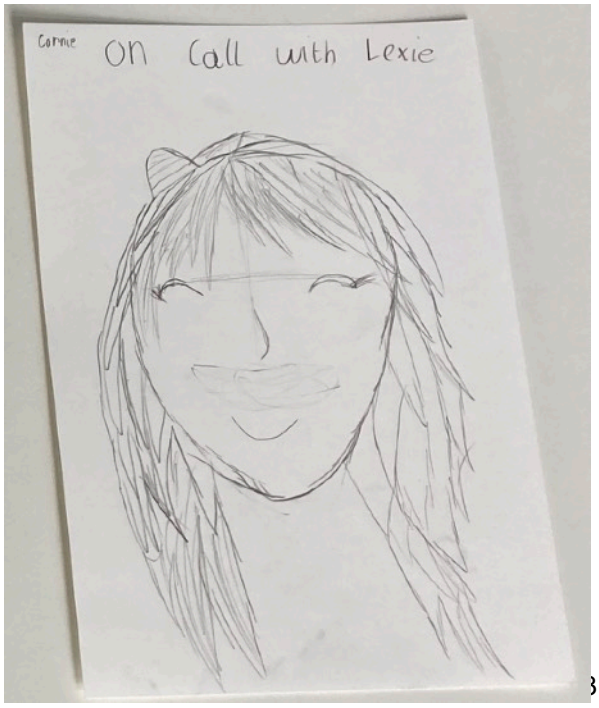
Many children drew pictures of outdoor spaces or spaces full of nature (as above). Some of these spaces were about finding peace, quiet and calm. Other outdoor spaces were about finding inspiration in new, busy or exciting places such as a crowded beach or the funfair - 'happy places'.

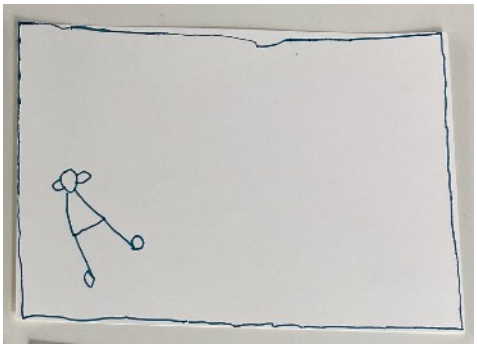


Home and family also featured heavily; the idea of a safe, familiar place in which to relax and feel secure being important in order to think creatively. Some of the younger children drew smaller spaces within their homes; a wardrobe they like to hide in, for example. Private spaces like a non-shared bedroom or lying in the bath were important to older children.



Overall, we observed a real split within the groups between those who felt they needed to be alone in order to think creatively and those who who felt they needed to have friends or family around them or be in busy places.





This helped us to reflect on how we might create a space that caters to these individual needs. And more widely, how effectively schools are able to recognise and cater to children's individual needs, learning styles and personalities with busy classes of 30+ and all the curriculum (and budgetary) restrictions staff are required to work within.

Running themes in children's wishes for creative spaces over both Year 1 and Year 6

Nature, the outdoors, fun spaces, fun things to do, food and drink, quiet and peaceful, time spent alone (at bedtime), silence, music, sounds of nature, white noise of other people.

Running themes in Year 1 specifically

Flowers, colour, cosy space, hiding spaces and enclosed, safe spaces, small, defined areas put together to create bigger areas, play and objects for play.

Running themes in Year 6 specifically

Water, their own objects and curated space (eg. their bedrooms), privacy, community and collaboration, games and activities, technology, quiet and calm, clean and tidy work spaces, silence, music.

Rachel's observations on the children's thoughts, ideas and drawings

"Working with the children at Dee Point, thinking about their creative spaces, and exploring the creative space of others was a really interesting and useful experience. In terms of design, it opened up so many opportunities and ideas for developing a space in response to their ideas which will pique their interest, encourage them to explore and build upon their observational and analytical skills - as well as use their imaginations.

The workshops also highlighted the children's individuality. We saw some natural collaborators, and those who need a bit more privacy to think and create. There were lots of different preferences and requirements for creative spaces in order for the children to think of their best ideas. The workshops have exposed some really exciting challenges for us to deliver an installation in which we hope to cater to different needs and encourage the children to work towards a collaborative goal."

Below, initial design sketches by Rachel based on the ideas, thoughts and needs raised by children during the design workshops:

THE FORGOTTEN NEWS DESK: DECOMPRESSION SPACE / WRITING ROOM

Three different ZONES in the one space. The zones are based on the different stages of the creative process and try to cater to the children's different requirements to develop their best ideas.

ZONE ONE: A relaxation, play and thinking space. Inspirational images and natural elements. A cosy, comfortable 'laid back' area to mull over ideas.

ZONE TWO: Individual focus. A more traditional, open plan office space with 'divided' desks. Children get the opportunity to 'Curate Their Space' by selecting what they need to come up with their best ideas and get them down on paper. These objects can include practical materials, inspirational objects and objects for play.

ZONE THREE: Collaborative Space. An organised space to bring individual ideas together in a collaborative effort. With a focus on teamwork, common goals, delegating responsibilities and sharing of ideas.

Writing workshops with writer & poet Gabriella Gay

These were practical sessions during which Gabriella led writing exercises and posed a series of statements about writing. The children were invited to show whether they agreed with the statements, or not, by standing on one side of the room or the other. The notes below reflect the discussions that these statements inspired.

Words can change the world - most agreed

“(the phrase) ’Climate Change’ has changed the world, its raised awareness of the issue.”

“Words can change your life. You might say something that gets you put in prison.”

“If you talk in front of people, it can inspire them to do something.”

All good writing is neat with good spelling - most disagreed

“Content is more important."

“Spelling doesn’t matter but neatness does, otherwise people won’t be able to read what you’ve written.”

“Professional writers should have good spelling.”

All writers publish story books - all disagreed

“Not all good writers publish their work.”

“Not all writers write stories.”

The process of writing is more fun that the finished product - half and half (more boys agreed that disagreed)

“Planning is the fun-est, finding the words.”

“I like all the build up, bringing it all together, the ideas.”

“It’s less exciting reading it back again and again.”

“It’s annoying copying it over.”

“I like when you read it and see how good you’ve done.”

My writing is mainly to show my teacher what I have learned - most agreed

“I get ideas, but I know it’s going to be marked.”

“I like to do it (writing) for fun but I also like to do it to show my teacher what I can do.”

“I do it for fun, with all the thoughts that go through my head. Not just for my teacher.”

“At school you might have to write certain skills into your writing. But at home you can just write your own stories.”

Most writing is done all alone - group split half and half

“The teachers help us when we write, and we get ideas from each other.”

“When I’m alone, I can think.”

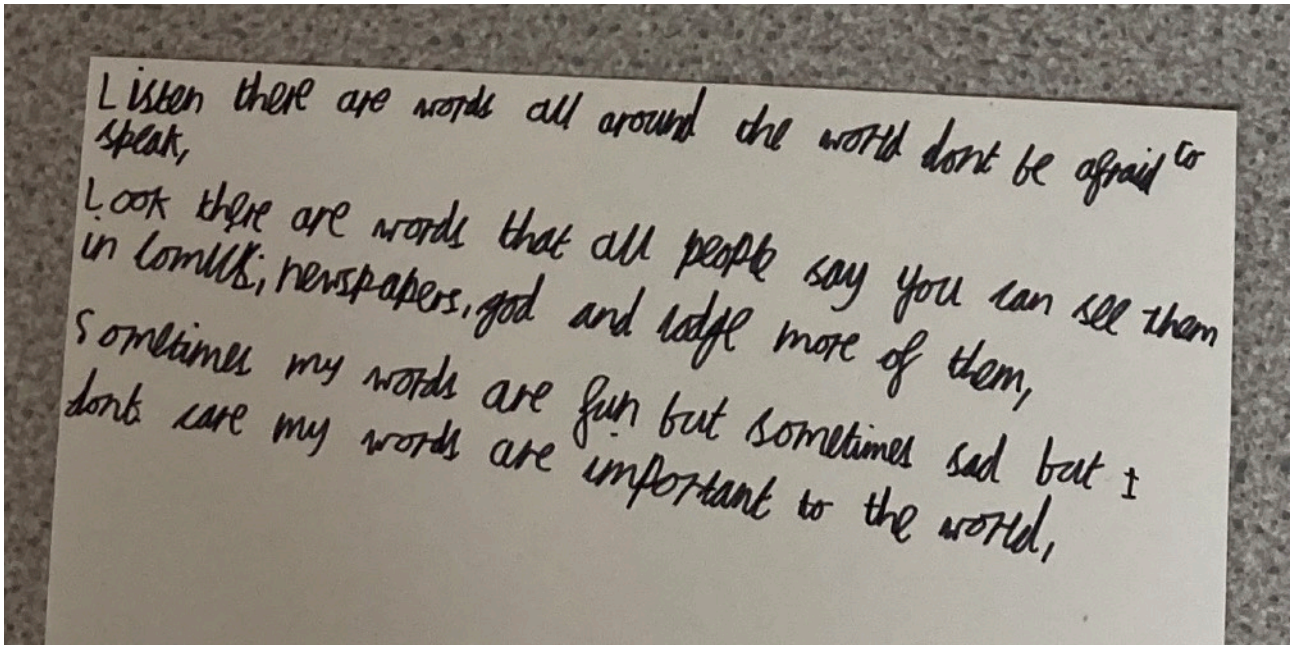
You own the writing you do at school - most agreed

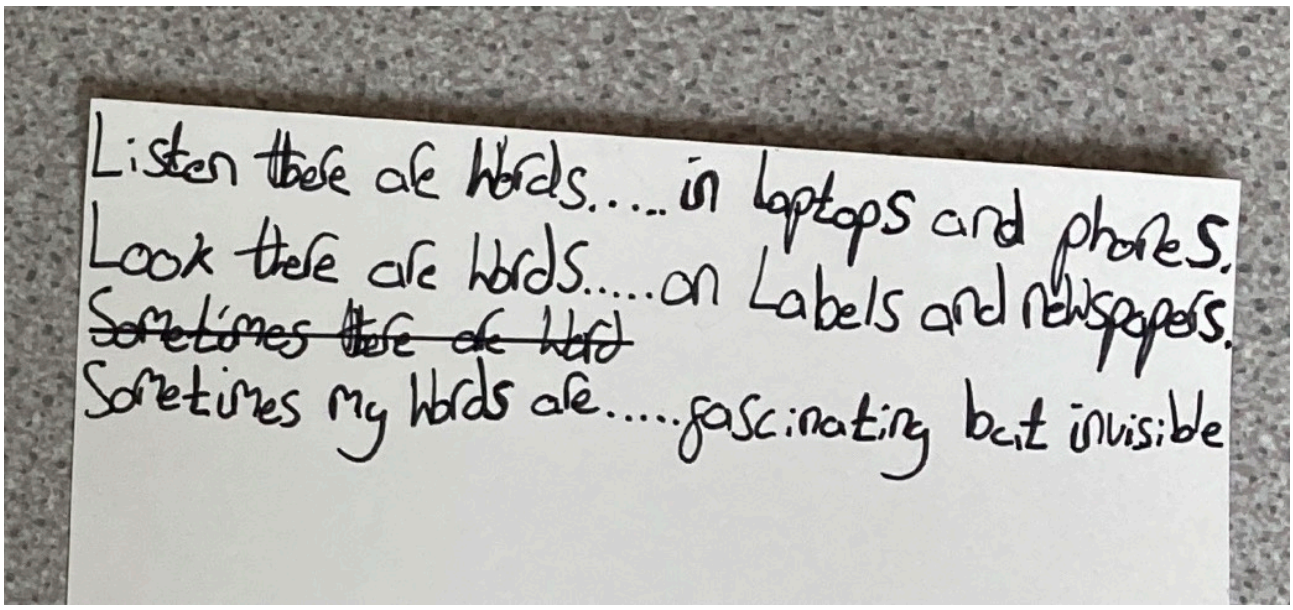
“It is actually your writing, you’ve done it.”

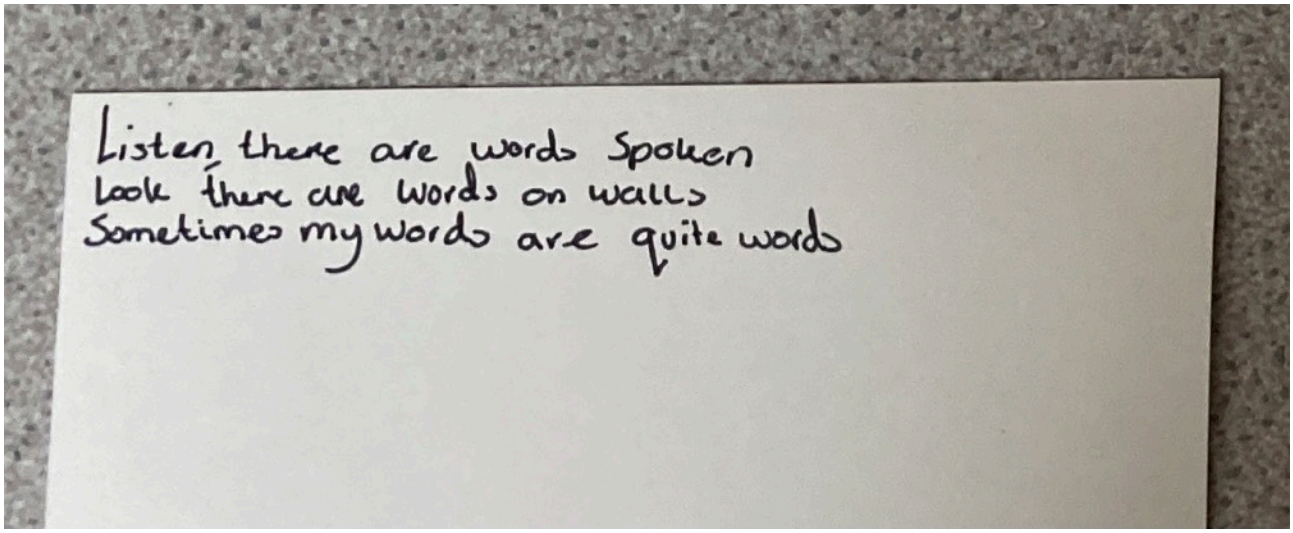
“If someone says you’ve done a good sentence it’s you that has done it.”

“It’s not yours because it’s in a school’s book. But it is your writing.”

Examples of children’s writing during a guided poetry exercise in response to the statement ‘Listen to my words’.







Reflections on the writing workshops

Most of children we worked with clearly loved writing, which is testament to the work the staff at Dee Point are doing to install an appreciation of writing and build confidence around writing in their children.

Despite the constraints of the curriculum, on the whole the children felt ownership over the writing they were creating and seemed to understand that they were being given the tools to not only write what they were being asked to write in class but also to write what they wanted to write in their own time.

There was an understanding amongst the Year 6 children that writing was a powerful thing, a means of expressing yourself and sharing your ideas and views with others. Although several of them commented that they perhaps don't quite have the confidence, or platform, to do that yet.

Focus group responses

In response to the question 'How do you feel about writing?'

"I feel quite calm doing it. It's quite a calm thing, writing." Atlas, special needs class

"I like doing pictures with my writing." Year 4

"I like long writing (stories), not just the short little sentences." Year 4

"I don't like writing when I'm tired. And when we're told, come on, we're going to do a writing lesson." Year 4

'When you're at home you can write what you want." Year 3

"I think it's harder to write at home because at school the teacher gives you more advice." Year 4

"I like comics." Year 5

"I think some writing is a bit too long for me." Year 5

"Sometimes my handwriting makes me feel a bit messy." Year 5

"I hate just stopping mid-sentence and having to go to break." Year 5

In response to the question 'What types of writing do you like doing?'

"I like poems. I write poems at home. Rhyming poems. It's quite hard." Year 4

"I write in my diary, because it feels like my diary is my best friend. A best friend you can tell everything to, without anyone else knowing." Year 4

"I like writing interesting stuff. Facts. From books." Year 5

“I like writing about what happening in my life. I’ve got a motorbike and I wrote a story about what happens when I go on the weekend racing. I shared it with my Motorcross friends. And my family” Year 5

“When I’m angry I write stories.” Year 5

“When I’m not in the mood, I like to write. It makes me feel a lot better, when I’ve written it. I’m happy when I’m doing it.” Year 5

“What I want to do is write a comic and then copy it about five hundred times and give it out to people.” Year 5

In response to the question ‘How do you learn about the world around you?’

“The Laptop… The internet.” Atlas, special needs class

In response to the question ‘What’s your favourite word?’

“Munchkin pumpkin, rhyming words.” Atlas, special needs class

In response to the question ‘Are words powerful?’

“Yes. If you read something it can really effect you. It can punch you. Or effect what you do in your future life or career.” Year 4

“Sometimes words in books can inspire you.” Year 3

“Some books can make you feel a lot of different feelings.” Year 4

“Some fronted adverbials are.” Year 5

“Yes, because we all use them, every time, every where.” Year 5

“If you want to argue with someone or encourage someone, maybe if you use the right words you might encourage them or just calm them down.” Year 5

If you do something and you share it you might encourage them.” Year 5

I think words are powerful because I can talk, and some people aren’t able to.” Year 5