

# Young People Taking the Lead

## Outline

Since the establishment of Creative Partnerships in 2002 the role of young people as partners has been integral to the planning, delivery and evaluation of any project. This case study focuses on what student led practice looks like and what conditions enable effective student led activity in a school. The (x)change project was a programme delivered by Tower Hamlets Summer University across 14 schools encouraging young people's leadership skills and the Catalyst project was a piece of work focused on one school exploring how to more actively engage it's students in their learning.<sup>1</sup>

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Hannah Wilmot

Creative Partnerships  
London East and South Case Studies

 Creative Partnerships



## Introduction

'In the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, policy such as Every Child Matters and national curriculum innovations such as citizenship, there is a growing movement for youth voice and participation in decision making'.<sup>2</sup>

This case study explores the experiences of four Creative Partnerships London East and South schools engaged in projects focusing on student voice. In 2006/07, Creative Partnerships London East and South developed a programme exploring student voice entitled the (x)change project. Core schools were offered the opportunity of participating in the (x)change project in addition to their main Creative Partnerships project (known as a Catalyst project). Three of the projects described in this study were (x)change projects and the fourth was a Catalyst project.

This study describes the projects and their impact and considers the conditions required for meaningful student consultation and participation. The study is based on evidence from interviews with students, senior managers, Creative Partnerships coordinators and other staff at the schools involved in the four projects together with two creative partners. All four schools have worked with Creative Partnerships since 2002.

### The Schools

Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College was a medium sized mixed technology college in Southwark, south London. In September 2007 the school reopened as St Michael and All Angels Church of England Academy<sup>3</sup> and a new principal started in post. Over two thirds of the students are male and the vast majority of students are of Black African or Caribbean heritage. About half speak English as an additional language and a third have special educational needs. The surrounding area is disadvantaged and half the students are entitled to free school meals. Ofsted judged the college to be 'good...with systems for care, support and guidance that are outstanding'. (Ofsted 2006)

1. A short film documenting outcomes of the (x)change programme will be available from the autumn term 2008/09. Please check the A New Direction website from October 2008 for more information.

2. From the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's draft pupil voice toolkit, 'What do children think?' Published as part of the Futures debate ([http://www.qca.org.uk/qca\\_6171.aspx](http://www.qca.org.uk/qca_6171.aspx)).

3. As the school was known as Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College at the time of writing it is referred to as such throughout the case study.

The college has undertaken a range of projects through Creative Partnerships including play writing, music technology and a two-year media design project with IPC Media.<sup>4</sup>

Bow School is a smaller than average, multicultural secondary school, in an area where there are high levels of deprivation. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is nearly five times the national average. A very high proportion of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the proportion of these students with a statement of special educational needs is very high. The rates of student mobility over the course of a year are higher than the norm. This is a culturally diverse school; approximately 80% of the students are from minority ethnic backgrounds, predominant groups are from Bangladeshi or African heritage. Nearly 60% of students speak English as an additional language. The school has achieved the Healthy School status. (Ofsted 2007)

Creative Partnerships projects at Bow School have always been cross-curricular and often whole school with a high level of professional development for staff. A two-year focus on preferred learning styles, for example, resulted in new approaches to teaching and learning which are now embedded in the school.<sup>5</sup>

Central Foundation Girls' School is a large secondary school in Tower Hamlets serving an area of high social deprivation. It has performing arts status and has recently been awarded a second specialism in Citizenship and English that the school refers to as 'Voice'. A very large proportion of the pupils have a minority ethnic heritage and the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language is high. (Ofsted 2006)

4. The IPC Media Schools Design Programme was the subject of a case study published by Creative Partnerships London East and South in 2006 and can be downloaded from the A New Direction website from October 2008 ([www.anewdirection.org.uk](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk)).

5. Preferred Learning Styles and Career Pathways by Jim Morris is included in the publication 'Learning about Learning and can be downloaded from the A New Direction website from October 2008 ([www.anewdirection.org.uk](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk)).

The current headteacher joined the school in 2005. A newly appointed member of the senior leadership team took on the coordination of Creative Partnerships at this point and projects have since been closely linked to the school development plan.

Grafton Primary School is described by Ofsted as 'an exceptional school. The individual child is at the centre of all it does...pupils who start in reception class at a very low level leave Year 6 with high standards'. The school serves a socially disadvantaged area of Islington. More than half of pupils are entitled to free school meals and a similar proportion have learning difficulties and disabilities. Management, leadership and teaching are all judged to be outstanding. The school has been awarded Artsmark Gold. (Ofsted 2005)

Creative Partnerships projects at Grafton have been closely linked to the school development plan. The school's Catalyst project in 2006/07, for example, was a music project working with the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, with aims linked to developing pupil autonomy.



## The Projects

### The (x)change projects

(x)change was a programme designed to give young people the opportunity of identifying and realising a change they wished to make in their school by working in partnership with a creative practitioner. Each school was allocated £1,000 for the students to spend on their project. The programme was managed by Tower Hamlets Summer University and commenced in October 2006 when a member of its team met the Creative Partnerships coordinator at each school. In partnership schools and young people identified the management group to lead the project. A member of school staff was also identified to act as the link teacher. The Tower Hamlets Summer University staff facilitated the projects, acting as mentors to the students and brokers for the partnership with the creative partners.

In November, an introductory training day at the Unicorn Theatre brought together five young people and the link teacher from each school. Through consultation with their peers and the school management, young people identified a focus for their project. Tower Hamlets Summer University identified two potential creative partners for the management group to interview. The project was planned with the creative partner of choice and took place during the spring term 2007, with the outcomes presented at a showcase held at Rich Mix in May 2007.

At Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College, the Creative Partnerships coordinator, Tim Smith, acted as the link teacher for the project and he selected a group of nine year 11 students to form the management group. The group reduced to a core group of three, as students dropped out due to competing pressures on their time. The college is scheduled to be rebuilt in the next few years and the buildings are old. The students decided to focus on the redecoration of the canteen. It became clear that original plans to completely redecorate the room were over ambitious and so students worked with artist Catherine Rive to produce a series of panels on the theme of respect. The project took place during the Easter holiday in 2007.

The project led Tim Smith and other staff at the school to reflect on how the school can empower students. The aspiration to build on the strengths of the (x)change project and incorporate student voice resulted in the delivery of a Creative Partnerships catalyst project with The Arts Catalyst in Spring 2008 in which a core group of students was elected to steer the artistic direction of the work.

At Bow School the Creative Partnerships coordinator, Jim Morris, described the student council at Bow as embryonic. Responsibility for the student council had been variously assigned amongst staff and had not, in the past, been a particular strength in the school. Its role had mostly been 'to represent students' views to the senior leadership team rather than a force in itself'. However, responsibility for the student council had recently passed to a new member of staff who was keen to make it a more active, vocal and effective body. The (x)change project was seen as a way of handing over control to students 'with as little constraint and intervention from teachers as possible'.

The (x)change project was introduced to the student council by a representative from Tower Hamlets Summer University. The school's Creative Partnership coordinator acted as the link teacher and helped to facilitate a debate to determine the focus for the project. The students settled on designing a website. The Creative Partnerships coordinator selected a group of six boys (spanning all five year groups) to form the management group. The students chose web designer Ibi Vaughan to work with and designed and developed BSW (Bow Students Website).<sup>6</sup> The website is designed for students and features sports, games, podcasts, webcasts, art, music and news. To be of value, the website needs regular updating and the school has made a commitment to pay Ibi to come to school once a month to work with the management group to maintain the site.

As noted by Ofsted, Grafton Primary School is a pupil-centred institution. A variety of mechanisms exist to consult pupils and encourage them to give their views. Members of the student council are provided with training, for example and all pupils are taught philosophy to support their thinking skills.

6. The website can be accessed from the Student page of the school's website, [www.bow-school.org.uk](http://www.bow-school.org.uk)

The school council already had a full agenda and so the school decided that (x)change would be a year 5 project. Pupils in the two classes volunteered for the management group, and five were selected. A year 5 teaching assistant acted as the link teacher. The pupils suggested four ideas for the project that they presented to the headteacher. The pupils discussed their ideas with the headteacher who asked them to go into each class so that every pupil had the opportunity to vote for their choice. The winning idea was to design a play structure. The management group selected a design company, Us-create, to support their project. The designers worked with small groups of pupils from each year group to develop plasticine models around the themes of nature, space and blank canvas. The management group used the ideas generated to produce three final designs that were presented in the school foyer and all pupils were invited to vote for their favourite. The playground structure based on space was the most popular.

Funding needs to be secured to realise the pupils' design but it is hoped that this can be incorporated into the school's rebuild in 2009. At the time of the project, the pupils in the management group were in year 5. They will therefore have left the school before the new playground structure is built. They were fully aware of this fact when they suggested the idea but were happy to be leaving a legacy at the school.



**STARS – The Catalyst project at Central Foundation Girls’ School**  
Headteacher, Anne Hudson, has a clear vision for the school and student voice is central to that vision. Schools need to change, she argues: ‘I don’t think schools can carry on doing the same things, there’s too much uncertainty in the world. Young people have to think creatively, solve problems and get on with other people. It is more important to learn how to learn than to learn content’.

She believes that traditional schooling is failing to engage the majority of students and ‘the best way of finding out what works is to ask young people’.

Central Foundation Girls’ School is a Training School, demonstrating good practice in teacher training and the Professional Development Team Leader, Joy Morgan, designed a programme to train a small number of students to observe student teachers and provide them with feedback. The school was ‘so impressed by the students’ insight and sensitive feedback’ that senior managers agreed to extend the concept. The new project that was supported by Creative Partnerships in 2006/07, was STARS (Students as Researchers). The model has run successfully in other schools and involves students researching whole school issues.<sup>7</sup> At Central Foundation Girls’ School, the need to improve classroom dialogue had been identified in the school development plan and this became the focus of the project. The project had two aims: to empower students by developing the role of student voice in the learning process; and to use the feedback from lesson observations, students research and experiences to transform learning and teaching to help raise achievement.

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7. The benefits of young people as researchers is discussed in Bragg, Sara, Consulting Young People: a review of the literature, London: Arts Council England, 2007.

STARS was introduced at an assembly for years 8 and 9 in late October 2006. Eighty students applied from which 30 were short-listed and interviewed. A group of 15 students were selected. The creative partner was Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Team part of the Bedfordshire Education Service,<sup>8</sup> who had undertaken similar work before. Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Team employs and trains a team of gap year students to work with teachers and students to develop young people’s participation in their schools. Three of these gap year student voice consultants were assigned to the project together with Brian Roberts, Advanced Skills Teacher Enterprise & Student Voice Manager.

The students received four full days of training covering teamwork, research ethics, classroom dialogue techniques, presentation skills and relevant research methodology including how to collect and analyse data. The research focused on practice in three departments: art and design, English and science. A team of student researchers, supported by a student voice consultant was assigned to each department where they observed lessons taught by two teachers, interviewed the teachers and students and ran focus groups with students. The aim was to identify good practice in relation to classroom dialogue and provide feedback to the teachers. The STARS teams returned to the classrooms after four weeks to note improvements in practice. The project culminated in May 2007 with presentations to all relevant stakeholders including the senior leadership team, staff, governors and parents.



8. Bedfordshire Education Service is part of Bedfordshire County Council.

## Impact and Outcomes

Each project had specific outcomes but there were many common areas of impact. For students, there was clear evidence of the development of a range of skills including:

- Team working.
- Leadership.
- Presentation skills.
- Time management.
- Research skills (most significant in STARS at Central Foundation Girls' School although the (x)change project at Grafton Primary School involved various forms of consultation).
- Communication skills: specifically how to talk to adults as equals; and the need for appropriate styles of communication for different occasions.

Being involved in these projects had a significant impact on the students' personal and social development. Levels of engagement and motivation were high and all students reported increased self-confidence, a finding supported by teachers. School staff also described how students had responded positively to being given new responsibilities and had matured in the process.

Nitsa Sergides, headteacher at Grafton Primary School said: 'We do philosophy at this school to get children to think for themselves, develop ideas and acquire knowledge...the children in this project have really grown; they have matured in their ability to explain their reasoning and have taken logical thinking to a higher level'.

Jim Morris, Creative Partnerships coordinator at Bow School: 'They've learnt how to manage their own conduct; how to present themselves to others without adult supervision'.

'Students are capable of so much more than we allow them to do'.

Many of the school staff involved in the projects admitted to being surprised at what the students could achieve. Joy Morgan at Central Foundation Girls' School, for example, said, 'Students are capable of so much more than we allow them to do'.

Reflecting on the artists' interviews at Grafton Primary School, the link teacher, Gloria Tofi said, 'They [the management group] were so professional... they surpassed anything I could have pictured'.

All the projects encouraged facets of creative thinking and action, in particular problem solving, independent thinking, critical reflection and evaluation. As one pupil at Grafton said, 'if I put my imagination in it, I can do anything'.

The reflections of students illustrate the varied impact of the projects: '[We've learnt] mutual respect; listening to others and understanding each others' views', Bow School; '[I've learnt] how to be responsible and schedule myself better', Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College; 'It made me think more, my brain is working better', Grafton Primary School; 'It's been better than I expected, I've learnt so much; so many new things. I pick up on lessons now: oh I know what [the teacher's] doing there...', Central Foundation Girls' School.

One common, although unplanned, outcome across all the projects was articulated by a student at Central Foundation Girls' School: 'It makes me appreciate how hard teachers work'.

Creative Partner Ibi Vaughan who worked at Bow School and Zoe Stanton (from Us-create) who worked at Grafton Primary School, both (x)change projects were interviewed for this study. For both, the experience of being interviewed by the pupils and students was new. Ibi commented, 'I liked it. When you go for interviews, you're normally nervous but with the young people I felt calmer'. Although both partners had considerable experience of working with young people, neither had worked on a student-led project before. Both were very positive about the experience;

'I think it is an honour to be working with such committed, focused and determined young people. It is very refreshing to be involved in a project such as this and the experience will be invaluable'.

'In this situation I have met with the young people from the very beginning and it is their aims and objectives that are most important, something I find very inspiring and I think should happen a lot more'.

The partners believed the projects had reinforced existing knowledge of good practice such as facilitation and listening skills.

The objectives of these projects related predominantly to students and schools and the impact on teachers was therefore limited. In the (x)change programme, the lessons for teachers mostly related to the new dynamic between them, the students and the creative partner. Justin Ward, Creative Partnerships coordinator at Grafton Primary School said: 'You have to allow children to make their own mistakes and not step in. They need to learn from their mistakes'. Jim Morris, Creative Partnerships coordinator at Bow School observed that: 'You need to have the perceptiveness that as the link teacher you can cast a shadow over the relationship with an outsider merely by your presence'.

For schools, the potential impact of these projects is great and will depend in part on the receptivity of the institution. There were clear lessons for all schools, even those where student voice is already prioritised. As one Creative Partnerships coordinator said, '(x)change was for real not just paying lip service to pupil voice'.

The STARS project has already had an impact on teaching and learning at Central Foundation Girls' School. Although only three departments were initially involved, the students presented their findings to a meeting of over 90 staff and it is hoped to assign STARS groups to all departments in the future.

At Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College the move to academy status will see the introduction of project-based learning. As Haider Dastiger, deputy headteacher at the college remarked, 'The ethos behind project-based learning needs to extend into other areas of the school. If we want students to be autonomous in their learning, we have to give them power'. The evaluation of the (x)change project may help to inform future projects at the school as it develops as an academy.

## Conclusion

All four projects gave pupils and students the power to affect change. There was, however, a fundamental difference between the three (x)change projects and STARS, the Catalyst project. The (x)change programme was devised by adults but strove for student autonomy; young people decided on the change they wished to make; selected the creative partner and worked with this partner to bring about change. Students were supported by adults but adult intervention was minimised. STARS had a much higher level of adult input: the research focus was determined by the school, students received formal training and a number of adults were available to support all stages of the process. As outlined above however, the impact was broadly similar for all students as was their sense of pride and achievement. One of the most significant factors for the students was the reversal in the power relationship with adults that occurred in all four projects. One Central Foundation Girls' School student commented, 'After our feedback to the teachers we went back and they had put our ideas into practice. It makes me feel so proud'. One Grafton Primary School pupil said, 'The best bit was being in charge of the people who are normally in charge of us' and another one remarked, 'It's been better than I expected...I thought adults would have more say but it's been 99% child-led'.

In the evaluation of the (x)change projects, it became clear that the amount of adult support required to facilitate a student-led project may have been underestimated. (x)change was a relatively small-scale project for the schools and staff from Tower Hamlets Summer University provided what support they could within the confines of the project. As a Catalyst project, STARS received a greater level of funding and was able to incorporate a high level of training that equipped the students with the skills required to undertake the project with competence and confidence. It has also left the students in a position to act with greater autonomy in the future, for example, the research students have identified the focus for the next STARS project. Describing this process, the Creative Partnerships coordinator, Lisa Gorman said, 'STARS started top down, we trained students and gave them the skills and now it's flipped over'.

Together with training for students, another important factor in the success of these projects was facilitation by an outsider. The following students' comments illustrate this point: 'The gap year students were closer to our age which was good. I felt more comfortable talking to them', Central Foundation Girls' School; 'She's [from Tower Hamlets Summer University] like a big sister. She talks on our level so we can understand', Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College.

Whilst the value of outside expertise was appreciated by teachers and students alike, it would be a mistake to exclude school staff as Mark Smithers, Student Voice coordinator at Central Foundation Girls' School explained: 'The emphasis needs to be on students and teachers working together; if you put students into a pigeon hole to do their own thing, you can leave the institution behind'.

When discussing the need to develop an ethos of student participation, one deputy headteacher argued, 'you have to carry the staff with you otherwise you get compliance culture which is the worst you can have'. This brings us back to Central Foundation Girls' School headteacher Anne Hudson's assertion. If schools need to change and student voice is, in part, a mechanism to affect this change, we need to look seriously at the impact of this work at an institutional level. From the evaluation of these projects and the reflections of those people interviewed for this case study the following conclusions about the conditions that enable effective pupil/student participation and consultation in schools, can be drawn:

'The emphasis needs to be on students and teachers working together; if you put students into a pigeon hole to do their own thing, you can leave the institution behind'.

- There needs to be a shared understanding that human rights are at the core of the school community.
- Student voice needs to be a school-wide policy not simply the application of one-off projects or confined to particular lessons.
- Student voice should be built on the principle of inclusion – whose voices are being heard?
- Teachers have to be willing to hand over control; senior managers need to explain to teachers how they will benefit from doing this.
- Staff must feel that they matter and are listened to.
- If you ask a question, you must be prepared to listen to the answer and take some action as a result.
- For meaningful and sustainable participation, schools must be willing to change.

**Hannah Wilmot**





In October 2008, the three London Creative Partnerships teams (London East and South, London North and London West) joined together to become **A New Direction**, a new independent organisation delivering Creative Partnerships' three new programme strands (Enquiry Schools, Change Schools and Schools of Creativity) in schools across the capital, and extending its reach to 21 London boroughs. The organisation is also looking to develop other strands of work outside of the Creative Partnerships programme. For more information about A New Direction visit the website – [www.anewdirection.org.uk](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk)

## **A New Direction**

Discover, 1 Bridge Terrace,  
Stratford, London E15 4BG

[info@anewdirection.org.uk](mailto:info@anewdirection.org.uk)  
[www.anewdirection.org.uk](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk)

**Creative Partnerships London East and London South** were established as two of the first sixteen Creative Partnerships areas in 2002. Delivering programmes with schools in Hackney, Islington, Newham, Tower Hamlets and Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark, they merged in April 2006 to form one Creative Partnerships area delivering a joint creative programme in those eight boroughs.

The programme placed creativity and imagination at the centre of teaching and learning, working across the whole school curriculum, and exploring different ways of working together and making meaningful change through long-term partnerships between educational institutions and creative individuals and organisations.

**Compiled by:** Angela Hall  
and Yejide Adeoye

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