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# Wise About Words Project Report

A Norwich Theatre and Wensum Trust collaboration



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# Executive Summary



The Wise About Words (WAW) project was a two-year collaboration between Norwich Theatre and The Wensum Trust, generously funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The project aimed to explore the power of storytelling as a pedagogical strategy to enhance literacy skills, imaginative language, active listening, and vocabulary enrichment. Additionally, it sought to foster metacognitive strategies, executive function skills, and well-being among children.

The project involved eight primary schools in Norwich and North Norfolk, within The Wensum Trust and included sixteen teachers (eight in year 1 and eight more in year 2) and four artists. Teachers and artists worked closely as co-learners to create an immersive and collaborative learning environment.

The drama approaches incorporated in WAW— such as characterisation, role play, hot-seating, devising, and forum theatre — were augmented by additional non-verbal techniques like movement, tableaux, mime, and soundscapes. These approaches were carefully chosen to help address potential barriers to learning, providing a multi-dimensional and immersive learning experience.

By working with both traditional and contemporary written texts and creating new stories, WAW encouraged students to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and develop a deeper appreciation for the world around them. Moreover, the project empowered the children, giving them a voice and instilling a sense of value, thereby nurturing their confidence and self-expression.

The first year saw each artist working with two assigned schools, forming close relationships through multiple in-school residencies. Continuous professional development opportunities were also embedded throughout the project, offering training, expert modelling, in-class support, coaching, mentoring, team teaching, and reflection and feedback.

The project faced unique challenges due to external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic and staffing issues. However, effective communication, support, flexibility and understanding enabled successful implementation.

Other challenges, such as scheduling conflicts and workload pressures, were addressed throughout the project by adapting implementation approaches. The project team worked hard to understand the workings of each individual school in these unprecedented times and to engage Senior Leadership Teams (SLT). Gaining their support and recognition by enabling opportunities for them to see and experience the pedagogy for themselves, changing the language we used around the project and emphasising its alignment with existing school strategies was key to the project's success.

While the project achieved considerable success in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1), it faced some challenges in Key Stage 2 (KS2). The emphasis on assessments and academic requirements in KS2 presented difficulties for some teachers to fully embrace the WAW methodologies, feeling they did not have the time to dedicate to learning which did not show instant results. This was not out of desire but pressure. Two of the eight schools reported that test preparation significantly impacted the allocation of time for other activities beyond literacy, Maths and Science.

Stakeholders should recognise that effective WAW pedagogy requires time to learn and implement. As a result, hard evidence of impact takes time. Adopting a long-term curriculum approach to the WAW programme could address this issue resulting in stronger skills and experiences for children in the Key Stages over time.

Considering further differentiation to cater to the diverse needs of the children across the different Key Stages could also be part of the project's legacy.

Blended learning approaches were introduced along with physical resources. Webinars, WAW staff meetings, whole school WAW days, and free WAW evening courses open to all school staff proved effective in supporting teachers' understanding and dissemination of techniques.

WAW's inclusivity, adaptability, and advocacy expanded its reach, with additional staff engaging in the evening drama courses. This initiative, along with Development Days, Twilights and Head Teacher involvement, gained support from other school leaders, positively influencing project outcomes.

Teachers' relationships and empowerment were key successes, revolutionising their approach to teaching and boosting their confidence and passion. The project also fostered inclusivity with many case study examples showing how the pedagogy enabled all children to thrive.

The project's success led to the development of a robust WAW Toolkit comprising forty drama games and techniques, empowering all teachers across each school to facilitate immersive, active learning experiences.

A Core Planning Group was formed initially to aid communication and steer the project, and in the second year, it evolved to focus on development and legacy.

The evaluation, conducted by the University of East Anglia (UEA), focused on WAW's impact on teaching, learning, and school cultures. It employed various methodologies, including interviews, observations, logbooks, case studies, and questionnaires. The evaluation provided valuable insights into the project's transformative nature and its profound influence on teachers' practices and students' learning experiences particularly in EYFS and KS1.

The WAW project has had a significant impact on various stakeholders, including teachers, children, the theatre, and the artists involved.

Key outcomes include increased understanding and confidence in embedding arts-based learning among teachers, improved emotional understanding, communication, and literacy skills for children, and enhanced support for schools and senior leaders by the theatre and artists. WAW has created a strong network of teachers committed to continuing and embedding arts-based practices in their schools.

The project involved 20 teachers directly and an additional 12 participating in CPD sessions. 432 pupils experienced the impact of arts-based learning during the project's 1248 hours of contact time with artists in schools.

Teachers' testimonials and child case studies highlight the transformative impact of WAW on professional growth and student development. The project's legacy is evident in the availability of WAW Toolkits in all classrooms, booked WAW CPDL and inset days for the new academic year, and inclusion in the majority of School Improvement and Development Plans (SIDP).

A new pilot project introducing the WAW techniques to Teacher Assistants, will now begin in four of the eight schools to continue embedding the pedagogy and building its legacy.

Illustrations by Rose Feather  
Photography by Richard Jarmy



# Project Background

## About Norwich Theatre

Norwich Theatre is the centre of cultural life in its region. Guided by its charitable objectives it aims to enhance life chances and overall well-being of individuals, foster community cohesion, and encourage engagement.

Over the years, Norwich Theatre's education program has been dedicated to providing arts-based learning opportunities to schools across Norfolk. In 2017, the program took a significant shift, focusing on empowering schools and educators to integrate the arts seamlessly into the curriculum.

In fulfilling its mission, Norwich Theatre provides an array of Continuing Professional Development and Learning (CPDL) activities and support for schools in a variety of areas including; subject-specific knowledge eg: drama, dance, script-writing, and technical theatre; arts-based pedagogy, helping to facilitate cross-curricular learning; and utilises drama as a powerful tool to nurture well-being and cognitive functions.

A strong emphasis is placed on collaboration with schools, engaging teachers in every stage of piloting, developing, and evaluating activities. By fostering such partnerships, Norwich Theatre gains invaluable insights into curriculum and pedagogical practices, enabling them to refine their offerings continually.

## Norwich Theatre and The Wensum Trust

Norwich Theatre and The Wensum Trust have a long-standing relationship of eleven years. In January 2020 they formed a Creative Partnership firmly establishing shared objectives including using creative arts to support English teaching. Previously, the partnership primarily focused on collaborating with the Trust's Urban schools but Wise About Words (WAW) allowed the opportunity to develop the partnership further, working with schools within the Coastal and Rural Hubs addressing systemic disadvantage faced by children in diverse geographical areas of Norfolk and providing additional opportunities for artists to engage with these schools. Furthermore, the project's broader mission encompasses both creative and active learning practices throughout the curriculum.



# Wise About Words Project

Wise About Words (WAW) was a two-year project (Sept 21-July 23) between Norwich Theatre and Wensum Trust, generously funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

At its core, Wise About Words sought to explore the power of storytelling as a potent pedagogical strategy to bolster the development of essential literacy skills. These skills encompass imaginative language, reading for pleasure, active listening, and vocabulary enrichment. By delving into the captivating world of stories and integrating drama processes, WAW further aimed to foster the growth of students' metacognitive strategies, executive function skills and wellbeing.

Considering the unprecedented disruptions caused by the Covid pandemic, the well-being of the children was a primary concern. WAW's pedagogy, especially through story-sharing, provided a safe space for children to explore a range of emotions, develop coping strategies, and making sense of the world around them. Initial assessments conducted by the schools before the start of the project highlighted significant gaps in speech and language, social-emotional development, and independence among the students. The project set out to help

bridge these gaps and support the children in building essential skills.

The drama approaches incorporated in WAW — such as characterisation, role play, hot-seating, devising, and forum theatre — were augmented by additional non-verbal techniques like movement, tableaux, puppetry, masks, mime, and soundscapes. These approaches were carefully chosen to help address potential barriers to learning, providing a multi-dimensional and immersive learning experience.

By working with both traditional and contemporary written texts and creating new stories, WAW encouraged students to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and develop a deeper appreciation for the world around them. Moreover, the project empowered the children, giving them a voice and instilling a sense of value, thereby nurturing their confidence and self-expression.

The two-year duration allowed teachers ample time to deeply grasp and appreciate the pedagogy, develop their skills as effective facilitators, and witness tangible impacts on the children.





# Project Aims

The Wise About Words (WAW) project was driven by a set of ambitious and transformative aims, with a focus on empowering teachers and senior leaders to deliver a creative and immersive pedagogy to:

## **Reduce Barriers to Learning for Disadvantaged Pupils**

At the heart of the project lay a commitment to break down barriers to learning faced by pupils experiencing disadvantage. By providing teachers and senior leaders with creative, effective tools and strategies, WAW aimed to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment, where every student could thrive and reach their full potential.

## **Embed Story-Sharing into School Culture**

WAW sought to instil the art of story-sharing into the very fabric of school culture. By fostering a love for storytelling and creative learning, the project aspired to enrich students' literacy skills, particularly oracy, encouraging them to explore their imagination, develop communication abilities, and cultivate a passion for reading and writing.

## **Improve Literacy, Metacognitive Strategies and Executive Functioning Skills**

The project was driven by a profound commitment to enhance key cognitive and executive functioning skills among students. Through the exploration of stories and engaging drama processes, WAW aimed to bolster metacognitive strategies, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and building resilience. Additionally, students would develop executive functioning skills like sustained attention, working memory, and cognitive flexibility, which are vital for their academic and personal growth.

## **Support Teacher's Professional Development and Arts-Based Learning**

Central to the project was the dedication to supporting teachers' professional development, equipping them with the expertise to deliver effective arts-based learning in the primary classroom. Through continuous professional development opportunities, expert modelling, and in-class support, teachers would gain confidence and proficiency in integrating creative methodologies into their teaching practices.

## **Who we worked with**

8 Primary Schools within the Wensum Trust:

- Arden Grove Infant School - NR6 6QA
- Burnham Market Primary School - PE31 8JA
- Firside Junior School - NR6 5NF
- Garrick Green Infant School - NR6 7AL
- Heather Avenue Infant School - NR6 6LT
- Kinsale Junior School - NR6 5SG
- Lodge Lane Infant School - NR6 7HL
- Wells-Next-the-Sea Primary School - NR23 1JG

And the following professionals:

- 16 Teachers
- 4 Artists
- 1 Project Coordinator from Norwich Theatre
- 1 Project Manager from Norwich Theatre
- 1 Strategic Lead from Wensum Trust
- 1 Planning Group (made up of each of the above with the addition of a Head Teacher)
- 1 External Evaluator

# Project Delivery

The learning was drawn from an existing evidence base of pedagogy and was articulated in 4 strands:

- Active dialogue
- Image work
- Role work
- Drama based skills games

There was an encouragement to experiment, challenge and reflect, to seek out the very best outcomes over the two-year duration.

To ensure consistency and a solid foundation across all schools, the artists collaborated to agree on the delivery of twelve drama techniques in the first instance, although it was important to recognize that each artist would bring their own unique styles and methods of working.

Central to the project's success was its immersive and collaborative nature, with teachers and artists becoming co-learners, united in their mission to enhance pupil outcomes.

At the beginning of the project each artist was assigned two schools to work with for the first year, forming close relationships through multiple in-school residencies each term.

While the initial artist lineup remained consistent, unforeseen circumstances led to one artist leaving the project early in the first term. A new artist promptly stepped in to fill the role.

All four artists were retained for the second year, and it was agreed after discussions with both teachers and artists that each would continue working with their schools for the duration of the project. This decision was driven by the trust and strong relationships that had been built between the first cohort of teachers and their artist, a deeper appreciation by the artists of their individual school and their needs, and the fact that the artists would take on a more mentoring role with these teachers in year two whilst they start the process over again with 8 new teachers.



Only one school requested to work with a different artist in the second year to gain experience with different delivery methods and this was implemented. Although most teachers were happy that they stayed with their original artist, some did comment at the end of the project that they could now appreciate how seeing other ways of delivery would have been beneficial, but they maintained that what they needed at the time was safety, as they were still building confidence.

Throughout the project, continuous professional development (CPDL) opportunities were embedded, offering a blended model of on-site and online provision. This encompassed training, expert modelling, in-class support, coaching, mentoring, team teaching, and focused reflection and feedback. As a result, teachers developed, (to a varying degree) the confidence and proficiency to independently deliver the new methodologies, threading techniques seamlessly through the whole curriculum.

Over the course of the project the original twelve techniques were progressively enhanced and expanded upon, culminating in a robust WAW Toolkit comprising forty drama

games and techniques. This aimed to empower all teachers across each school to facilitate immersive, active learning experiences within the classroom and across curriculum.

## The Core Planning Group

A Core Planning Group was put together at the start of the project to help with communication and steer the project. In the second year, meetings evolved into a forum to address development and later legacy, with additional teachers joining the initiative. This expansion and renewed focus empowered more stakeholders to actively contribute to the project's growth and long-term impact. This group will continue to meet termly beyond the project to ensure legacy.



# Structure

## Year 1 - 8 Teachers

<p>Term 1 FOCUS - Storytelling through drama</p> <p>Artist Leads/Teacher Observes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1x Development Day</li><li>• 12x Artists residencies per school</li><li>• 2x CPD Twilights (online)</li><li>• Online Padlet</li><li>• Action Learning sets</li></ul>	<p>Term 2 FOCUS - Differentiation</p> <p>Artists Plans/Team Teach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 8x Artist residencies per school</li><li>• 2x CPD Twilights (online)</li><li>• Online Padlet</li><li>• 1x Artist Day</li><li>• Peer observation swaps</li><li>• Case Studies</li><li>• Action Learning sets</li></ul>	<p>Term 3 FOCUS - Working across curriculum</p> <p>Team Planning/Teacher Leads - Thinking cross curricular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1x Development Day</li><li>• 6x Artist residencies per schools</li><li>• 1x CPD Twilight (in person)</li><li>• Online Padlet</li><li>• 1x Artist Day</li><li>• 1x Triad meeting (Artist/Teacher/SLT)</li><li>• Journey so far (student voice and sharings with parents)</li></ul>
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In the second year of the project, an additional eight new teachers, one from each school, joined as part of the second cohort. Like the first cohort, these teachers followed the same structure to immerse themselves in the WAW pedagogy with their assigned artist. The addition of these new teachers resulted in each school having two WAW leads, fostering a collaborative approach to disseminating the acquired knowledge and learning to the rest of the school once the programme had concluded.

To ensure effective collaboration and support between the two WAW leads in each school, the planning team collectively agreed that, whenever possible, the second teacher should be from the same Key Stage as the first in each school. It was believed this approach would enable co-planning and mutual support, creating opportunities for shared strategies and resources across year groups.

Indeed, the implementation of this approach did yield outcomes in some schools, where wonderful co-planning activities transpired across year groups as early as term four.

Notably, some schools even extended their collaborative efforts by sharing their plans across the Key Stage. This resulted in whole school WAW Days, within some infant schools, allowing all teaching staff to appreciate and practise the methodologies then reflect with each other in the following staff meeting.

In three of the eight schools however, the pairing of teachers from the same Key Stage was not possible due to logistical constraints and staffing arrangements but this situation also presented unique advantages. For example, schools with a Reception teacher and a Year 5 teacher collaborating as WAW leads, now possess a valuable leader in each Key Stage to help with future dissemination.

An interesting observation within the project was the accelerated adaptation and recognition of impacts amongst the second cohort of teachers. It is thought this was due to the project being better defined, having established frameworks, additional support from SLT plus the knowledge and experience from the cohort one teachers.

Term 4 FOCUS - Dissemination	Term 5 FOCUS - Embedding across curriculum	Term 6 FOCUS - Legacy
<p>Teacher as Leader/Artist as Mentor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x Development Day</li> <li>• 3x Mentor sessions</li> <li>• 2x Triad meetings (Artist/ cohort 1&amp;2 teachers)</li> <li>• 1x CPD Twilight (in person)</li> <li>• 1x CPD staff meeting (all staff)</li> <li>• 1x Artist Day</li> <li>• Padlet/Resources</li> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Cohort 2 - 7x Artist residencies per school</li> <li>• Whole school WAW days</li> </ul>	<p>Teacher as Leader/Artist as Mentor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2x Mentor sessions</li> <li>• 2x Triad meetings (Artist/ cohort 1&amp;2 teachers)</li> <li>• 2x CPD Twilights (in person)</li> <li>• 1x CPD staff meeting (all staff)</li> <li>• 1x Artist Day</li> <li>• Padlet/Resources</li> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Mantle of Expert CPD</li> <li>• School Day visit to NT</li> <li>• Free 10-week WAW drama course at Norwich Theatre for any school staff</li> <li>• Cohort 2 - 6x Artist residencies per school</li> </ul>	<p>Teacher as Leader/Artist as Mentor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1x Development Day</li> <li>• 2x Mentor sessions</li> <li>• 1x Triad meeting (Artist/ cohort 1&amp;2 teachers)</li> <li>• 1x CPD Twilight (in person)</li> <li>• 1x CPD staff meeting (all staff)</li> <li>• Padlet/Resources</li> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Touchstone CPD</li> <li>• Open Theatre CPD</li> <li>• Cohort 2 - 5x Artist residencies per school</li> <li>• Final Seminar</li> </ul>

# Challenges, Learning and Progress

The implementation of WAW presented a transformative opportunity for both Norwich Theatre and the schools. Nevertheless, the journey was not without its fair share of challenges and valuable learning experiences. In this evaluation report, we delve into the obstacles faced, how we navigated them, and the progress made throughout the project.

## Change of Project Coordinator and Loss of Artist

At the outset, we encountered a setback with the sudden change of the Project Coordinator and the unfortunate departure of one of our artists. This transition posed difficulties in continuity and team synergy, particularly as the project was still in its establishing stage. However, the artist was quickly replaced and another of the artists took on the Project Coordinator role which proved to be invaluable. It has been mentioned by several stakeholders that having someone coordinating who fully understood the working and implementation of the project on the ground, allowed better understanding and communication amongst all stakeholders.

Through her experience she was also able to establish a comprehensive introduction process for the second cohort of teachers and those who joined the project part way through due to unforeseen challenges like teachers either leaving the profession, becoming ill or going on maternity leave, cultivating a supportive work environment to maintain a sense of shared purpose.

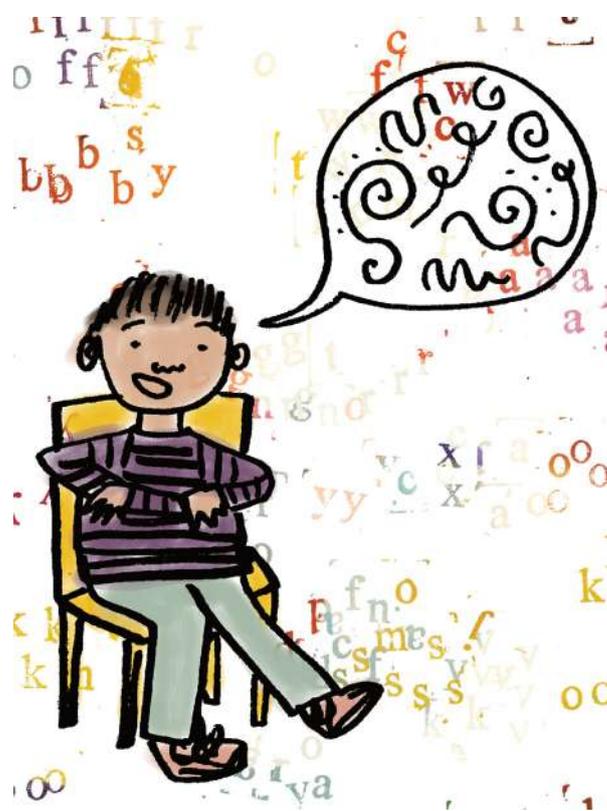
## External Factors

Unforeseen external factors, like the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers strikes and staffing issues, strained the project's implementation and hindered some of the artist's ability to schedule residencies effectively. In some schools, residencies were often cancelled or changed at the last minute. Having a good relationship

between the Theatre, artists and teachers meant artists were as flexible as they could be and made the best of the circumstances, often going above and beyond to support the teachers and schools.

Covid also meant that the CPDL twilights that happened in the first two terms took place online. These did not prove to be particularly successful. This could have been because in the initial stages the meetings did not consist of much accountability, but ultimately attendance was low and focus limited (some who attended were at home also providing provision for their children). Teachers later admitted, with all the other pressures arising from Covid, the online, after school twilights were the one thing they felt they could opt out of.

In term three the lift in Covid restrictions allowed us to meet in person and there was an incredible



shift in teachers' attendance. On the teachers request we also reorganised twilight sessions to a more convenient time (during the school day), leading to further improved attendance and positive anticipation from teachers. The group soon began to build a strong bond which continued to grow throughout the project. The outcomes from the sessions were also more productive, allowing teachers to physically experience techniques, support and reflect together. Twilights became something the teachers very much looked forward to and gained a great deal from.

**"It's a space where we get to be really supported, we test things out, we get things wrong, we learn from each other and have huge amounts of fun in the process"**

### **Coastal Schools**

Coastal schools faced unique geographic and economic challenges, due to seasonal work and lack of affordable housing due to the considerable number of second homes, so when a teacher left the profession part way through the project, recruitment was difficult in an already small staffed school. In addition, the Head was on long term sick leave for the first year of the project. Both factors made securing a stable WAW team harder. Fortunately, when the Head returned her support for the project and her staff were strong. The reception teacher who was finally appointed, embraced the project and soon built a strong bond with her artist and first cohort teacher. This enabled a large amount of learning to be achieved within the space of only two terms.

### **Initial Lack of Understanding and Limited SLT Support**

The project faced a lack of understanding at its inception, with some teachers turning up to the first Development Day with little if no knowledge of the project or its aims. Most felt incredibly vulnerable at the start, and it took them the first term to start to fully understand the project. However, one teacher commented later that they "knew from that first day, despite my fears that this CPD was going to be different" with another saying "within 15 mins I realised this was one of the best decisions I had made in my teaching career. I had found my people."

Although the teachers involved began quite quickly to see the value and impact of the project, many of their colleagues expressed unhelpful attitudes seeing it as merely a "drama thing" rather than a valuable pedagogical approach.

It was also recognised early on that although the project had buy-in from the Trust (and after the first term significantly from the teachers involved), there was a gap in the middle where the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) for each school sat. Gaining support from the SLT became obvious and necessary to make sustainable and impactful change but working from the bottom up proved challenging.

Indeed, as the teachers started to really understand and value the methodologies, they became very concerned that if they did not have tangible evidence on impact, SLT's would not agree to a continued legacy.

Most schools at the time were within the bottom 20% in the country and most had Ofsted inspections in the first year of the project, so understandably pressure from Heads to produce fast outcomes with a strong emphasis on writing was prevalent.

Clashes between WAW CPDL dates and school dates happened in some schools in the first couple of terms. SLT did not quite understand the project or the support the teachers needed

with some teachers struggling to find space or reflective time with their artist.

We soon learnt the language we used around the project was going to be important for understanding and buy-in from those not involved. We began eliminating the word "drama" and began the creation of a shared document with the Trust's Primary Strategic Lead, communicating how the pedagogy closely aligned with the Trusts already established strategies of Emotion Coaching and Reading for Pleasure.

We also worked in term three to show teachers and SLT how the techniques could be used across curricular and in short bursts, eliminating the theory that it was an added extra or that they had to lead whole drama sessions.

We learned that involving SLT more in open communication, encouraging them to attend Development Days and showcasing successful outcomes via case studies, and our change of language was pivotal in gaining wider recognition and support. Engaging SLT members and emphasising the long-term nature of the project enabled us to further overcome resistance.

We also introduced the teachers to Voice 21 and their assessment on oracy. The teachers were keen not to have to do more assessments or tick boxes, but also recognised if SLT were going to continue to support the work, some kind of evidence had to be presented. This, however, was not ever really used in any formal way with the main source of evidence continuing to come from case studies, compared writing with classes not involved in the project and teachers' observations.

Other staff members began to become intrigued by the project and SLT support grew. This led us to find ways of including more staff in training and in term three our focus turned to dissemination of the work.

### **Expanding the Reach of WAW: Inclusivity, Adaptability and Advocacy**

The project continuously strived to extend its impact and reach. In term five Norwich Theatre offered a free 10-week evening drama course, to engage other staff across each school, introducing them to the benefits of WAW techniques. This initiative showcased the effectiveness of the project to a broader audience within the school community. The group was small but included teachers, TAs, and a Head teacher. This had a profound effect on the legacy of the project.

Once the Head Teacher had actively experienced and understood an extensive range of techniques for herself, she became almost an ambassador for the project. This reaffirmed artists' belief that stakeholders must SEE and DO the techniques themselves before they can fully appreciate the pedagogy. After her experience, the Head Teacher actively fostered the dissemination of learning, not only within her school but also amongst her peers. This, along with the teachers' unwavering belief in the pedagogy began to yield tangible results, gaining recognition and support from other school leaders.

WAW meetings were held with all Head Teachers, fostering open discussions on the project's benefits and outcomes. A planning meeting with teachers and the Trust's CEO highlighted the transformative potential of WAW and its alignment with the Trust's vision took place, and most schools were motivated to make WAW staff meetings compulsory.

The effectiveness of WAW was further evident through small group trial sessions conducted for children who faced challenges in a larger class environment. The project showcased numerous instances where these children initially struggled to engage in regular classroom lessons but found confidence and a voice through smaller WAW sessions. This newfound empowerment resulted in increased or full participation in class activities, positively impacting their relationships with peers and overall classroom experiences.



Teachers widely acknowledged that WAW's techniques fostered inclusivity, providing all children, regardless of their abilities, with an equal opportunity to thrive. By creating a level playing field, WAW ensured that every student had the chance to shine and contribute to the learning process.

**"At the start of the project child X lacked confidence in whole class situations and due to severe speech and language difficulties he was wary of sharing ideas and would become very upset and reluctant to try new things. X quickly became engaged in the project...has made HUGE improvements ...gained confidence in his ability and if not always able to express himself through words, he can in movement. He will now happily share his ideas with the whole class and will ALWAYS put himself forward to take the lead role in any active learning sessions."**

Further CPDL opportunities were arranged for additional support. Facilitation workshops were delivered by Touchstone, a company who deliver drama workshops for children with autism, and Open Theatre who specialise in nonverbal physical theatre. Both were open to all staff members, not just those connected to the project and proved particularly helpful to several TA's.

### **Evaluative Strategies**

In the initial stages, the evaluation methods set up by the theatre, such as action learning sets and detailed learning logs, proved to be overwhelming and time consuming for teachers and so were not effective. As a result, we adapted and implemented more streamlined evaluative approaches, and reflective face-to-face twilight sessions for the second year which proved more successful. It became particularly important to us not to bombard teachers with extra work, understanding better by term three the pressures and stresses they were all already under within their profession.

The teachers and project team's evaluation took a qualitative approach when it came to impacts on children learning with the use of case studies, observations, and teachers' professional knowledge and experience. In some cases, there were examples of written work that was compared to parallel classes writing who had not had experience of the pedagogy and there were significant differences.

In term three of the project, regular Artist Days were introduced, providing artists with invaluable opportunities to come together, experience each other's approaches, reflect, share materials, advice, and best practices. These dedicated sessions proved to be instrumental in fostering a stronger sense of support and camaraderie among the artists, while also offering a deeper insight into the specific needs of the project.

Upon evaluation, artists expressed a desire to have worked even more closely together as a team.

# Support from Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Norwich Theatre found the support provided by the Foundation's Relationship Manager and Evaluation Team to be invaluable. Regular meetings and guidance helped keep the project on track, encouraged fresh perspectives on challenges and at times, prevented the project team from giving up on certain elements. Their support added a crucial layer of external input, enhancing the project's overall effectiveness and resilience.

The final meeting held in London also proved to be a particularly significant and insightful gathering, serving as a catalyst to propel our legacy plans forward.



## Fostering Strong Teacher Relationships - A Key Success

One of the most significant achievements of WAW is the establishment of strong and meaningful relationships among the participating teachers. During one of the sessions, teachers candidly expressed how teaching can often be a solitary profession, leading to feelings of isolation. In response, the project team worked diligently to create a safe and supportive space for the teachers, where trust and a shared commitment to empowering children prevailed.

By nurturing a culture of collaboration and mutual knowledge and support, WAW has successfully made teachers feel valued and appreciated. The project consistently reminded teachers that it revolved around their growth and development as educators and this emphasis was pivotal in fostering a positive and empowering environment, encouraging them to embrace a transformative mind set.

The Head Teacher of the coastal schools believes this has had a particularly

strong impact on her staff who often feel geographically isolated from network opportunities with other peer professionals.

All teachers commented on how they actively looked forward to both WAW Twilights and Development Days.

**"This project has made me feel fully supported and listened to. So often we are asked to do things as teachers with limited time, money and resources which makes it unachievable - therefore making me feel inadequate. WAW has made me feel confident, passionate, and brought me so much fun which is much needed!"**

### Empowering Teachers - A Profound Impact

WAW has proven to be a catalyst for profound change in some teachers' practice, particularly those in EYFS and Key Stage 1. Many teachers have expressed how the project has "revolutionised their approach to teaching." By encouraging teachers to become facilitators rather than traditional instructors, WAW prompted a rethinking of their pedagogical methods.

"I now plan more interactive lessons and opportunities for movement"

"This project has made me approach my planning differently - not just putting WAW techniques in but I now structure my lessons more actively and creatively, which I love."

"It has changed my perspective of teaching. I can now be more flexible and creative [...] I am a facilitator to their learning, not an instructor."

Throughout the project, the CPDL provided has been instrumental in ensuring that teachers receive ongoing support and guidance. Many teachers themselves have commented on the legacy that the CPDL on this project will leave with them.

"WAW has revitalised my interest in teaching, and I look forward to the future with WAW and creativity at its core."

"Over the two years of the project, I have taken on a more leading role within my school with regards to this project and in other areas. I can see the progress in my pupils' confidence, and this has also been mirrored with my own."

### Challenges within the School Environment

The Wise About Words project encountered various challenges arising from the simple fact we were working within a school environment after a major pandemic.

- **SATS and Scheduling Conflicts:** After year one we learnt that the timing of SATS assessments in April and May posed pressure on the whole school, not just the teachers within the year groups involved and proved challenging in coordinating the project's activities effectively. Furthermore, the period after half-term during the summer provided limited opportunities for booking residencies and engaging teachers in meaningful ways. In year two we arranged our timetable to account for these findings.
- **Different Key Stages and Workload:** Some artists, particularly those working with teachers from Key Stage 2 (KS2) often experienced challenges due to frequent changes or cancellations of residencies at the last minute because of changes in priority for tests and unforeseen circumstances happening in school that day.

Teachers' already demanding workload and lack of staff also hindered efforts to organise successful peer observations in the first year. Consequently, artists had to be incredibly patient and flexible, the project had to adapt and foster alternative ways of collaboration, such as incorporating shared practice as an essential component of the Twilights.



### **Challenges in KS2 Implementation:**

While the project achieved considerable success in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1), the implementation in KS2 encountered certain hurdles. The emphasis on assessments and academic requirements in KS2 presented difficulties for some teachers to fully embrace the WAW methodologies, feeling they did not have the time to dedicate to learning, which did not show instant results. This was not out of desire but pressure.

In two of the eight schools, preparation of tests had a significant impact on the allocation of time given to other activities outside of Literacy, Maths and Science.

Stakeholders must understand that the WAW pedagogy takes time to learn and facilitate effectively. As a result, hard evidence of impact takes time. A long-term curriculum approach to the WAW programme could alleviate this issue and in years to come, children moving through the Key Stages will have stronger skills and experience with the techniques.

Consideration could be given to further differentiation in response to the needs of the children across the different Key Stages as part of the legacy.

### **Blended Learning:**

In the first year the project team created a WAW Padlet where stakeholders could upload and comment on anything WAW related. The artists created many videos showing techniques and ways in which to facilitate. However, it became clear towards the end of year one that most teachers were not using the Padlet. They expressed a strong preference for physical resources over digital materials.

In response, the WAW project team developed the WAW Toolkit. A pack of cards displaying and explaining techniques to cater to teachers' needs and provide tangible, hands-on resources that could easily be shared and tested amongst staff in meetings. At the end of the project every classroom in each school was

provided with this toolkit.

Additionally, we continued to embrace blended learning approaches. Some teachers recorded sessions so children could recall and reflect on their work. Others made videos of themselves delivering to their class to share with their peers. There is a commitment for the WAW teachers to make webinars beyond the project to help further disseminate techniques.

Children created recorded soundscapes and interviews with characters. A couple of teachers in the second year clearly had good knowledge around gaming and audio-visual media but time did not allow for further exploration of this with storytelling.

It may be worth considering for future projects, having an artist on the team whose specialism is



# UEA Evaluation

Norwich Theatre sought the expertise of the University of East Anglia (UEA) to conduct an external evaluation of the WAW project in the second term of the project. Initially, the evaluation aimed to look at how WAW helped teachers explore and integrate story-sharing elements into their practice, as well as how it contributed to the development of children's metacognitive and executive function skills through storytelling. However, given the changes in language, project redefinition, and challenges faced in the first year, the evaluation question was later modified and became:

**“What impacts has the WAW program had on teaching, learning, and school cultures?”**

It aimed to examine how WAW transformed teaching practices, enhanced the learning experience of students, and its potential impact on the culture within the participating schools.

## **Evaluation Methodology**

Researchers from UEA's School of Education and Lifelong Learning employed a diverse range of methodologies, including interviews, observations, logbooks, case studies, and actively engaged in meetings with teachers, artists, and Senior Leadership Teams (SLT). They attended a development day and two CPD Twilights to gain a comprehensive understanding of the project. In the second year a range of questionnaires were sent to all school staff at various times across the year to gauge their understanding of the project. These questionnaires also provided quantitative data.

UEA's final evaluation report *Wise About Words evaluation: Concluding report* (Gordon and Brownsword, 2023) is available as a separate document upon request at [takepart@norwichtheatre.org](mailto:takepart@norwichtheatre.org).



# Impact and Outcomes

Wise About Words has left a profound impact on various stakeholders involved, from teachers and children to the theatre and the artists themselves.

1248 hours of contact time with artists in schools allowed for meaningful and sustained engagement.

432 pupils actively participated in WAW sessions, experiencing the impact of arts-based learning.

20 Teachers were directly involved in the project, engaging with its core elements and practices.

15 CPD sessions, along with 3 full CPD Development Days and 5 Artist Days, provided a comprehensive and enriching learning experience.

12 teachers participated in some form of CPD session, expanding the reach of the project's influence.

For Teachers/Leaders:

- One of the most significant outcomes of WAW for teachers and leaders has been an increased understanding of the value of the arts as a teaching tool.
- They have gained confidence and knowledge in embedding arts-based learning across the curriculum
- WAW Teachers now have a strong, supportive network of peers that will continue to meet regularly and support one another in their continued practice and learning.
- Many teachers (80%) reported that WAW had a profound impact on their teaching methods and pedagogical approaches, instilling a strong desire to continue and firmly embed these practices into their respective schools.
- Most are engaging with future projects to build a legacy and make further impact for their children.
- Some teachers feel this project has had a significant impact on their confidence as individuals and professionals and it has left a curiosity for further learning.

"Wise About Words has left such a meaningful impact on me personally that it has given me aspirations of exploring how using this immersive and creative approach can aid in supporting the regulation of children as part of my prospective doctoral studies."

#### For Children:

- The impact on some children has been significant, particularly in EYFS and Key Stage 1. By engaging in WAW, children demonstrated improvements in emotional understanding, listening skills, focus, communication, and literacy. Teachers frequently recorded statements like "more engaged with activities," "vast improvement in confidence," "now able to work as a team," "confidence has grown in and out of the classroom," "now works more successfully in a group" and "more articulate in her writing."
- The approaches learned through WAW have notably boosted children's confidence and communication abilities. As one teacher shared, "the project taught them more about giving students a voice than their entire teacher training."
- WAW has proved to be, for some children, an effective way to support, as one Head teacher puts it, "the increasing number of children who are not school-ready" develop their skills.

#### For the Theatre:

- The theatre team gained a deeper understanding of working with schools and senior leaders, enhancing their ability to support CPDL at a whole school level.
- They have also developed a better awareness of the challenges faced currently in schools and continue to explore innovative ways of addressing these issues through the arts.
- Connections made nationally with exceptional artists and reputable organisations.
- A confidence in our expertise reinforcing our reputation.

#### For the Artists:

- The artists involved in WAW have also acquired improved understanding and skills for working with schools and senior leaders.
- They have a better understanding of the pressures faced by schools, enabling them to collaborate more effectively to create enriching opportunities for students.

- Embedded strong working relationships between each other and Norwich Theatre
- The experience has nurtured a strong desire among the artists to contribute towards addressing the challenges faced by young people within the current educational system.

#### **The Call for Continuation: The Power of a Third Year**

The impact and potential of WAW have been palpable throughout its journey. Most teachers and members of the SLT who participated in the project have expressed unanimity regarding potential for growth. They concurred that a third year of the project would have allowed for continued refinement, dissemination, and real embedment of the WAW techniques into the school's culture, ensuring that the project's impact endures long after its conclusion.

#### **Testimonials and Case studies**

Teachers' testimonials and child case studies were collected throughout the project. These underscore the success stories of the project and its impacts.

See case studies in Appendix A-D.

The testimonials from teachers speak volumes about the positive influence of WAW on their professional growth and their students' development.

See testimonials in Appendix D-K.

# Project Legacy

Through expanding its reach and nurturing a collective desire for continued growth, WAW has set the stage for a legacy of transformative education within Wensum Trust Primary schools.

- WAW Toolkits are now available in every classroom throughout the 8 schools
- WAW Staff CPDL and inset days are booked for the start of the new academic year in most schools, paid for from school budgets.
- WAW now appears on 6 out of 8 of the school's School Improvement and Development Plans (SIPD) for the new academic year.
- WAW teachers will continue to meet on a half term basis to share best practice, ideas, make webinars, support one another, and help each other evaluate impact.
- The Core Planning Group will continue and play a strategic role in developing the WAW approach more widely.
- A pilot project has already been put in place applying the WAW techniques to early intervention across EYFS and KS1 using TAs in four of the eight schools.

- Plans to apply for further Paul Hamlyn Foundation funding for a further three-year Early Intervention project using the WAW pedagogy have started.

## Recommendations

On reflection the following should be considered for future projects within schools.

- Get to know the school, how it functions, its individual needs and pressures then make the project bespoke, so it works for them.
- Have SLT on board from start and consider involving the whole school from the start with a light touch.
- Build strong relations on trust and support.
- Having a Project Coordinator who fully understand the project including how the work is delivered, is fundamental to a project's success.
- Build a robust, flexible team.
- Always make sure the teaching staff feel valued.
- Work within the school's language.
- Continuous reflection and adaptation are key to success.



The WAW project has delivered tangible and far-reaching outcomes for most stakeholders involved. Through its innovative approaches and dedicated efforts, it has enriched the lives of teachers, students, the theatre, and the artists themselves. The impact of WAW goes beyond the project's duration, leaving a real potential for legacy with both individual teachers, their practice, and within the educational landscape.

Norwich Theatre would like to thank The Wensum Trust, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the Senior Leadership teams in each school, Angie Hamilton, the children but most importantly the teachers who took part in this project. Their dedication to the profession, their insurmountable sense of curiosity and courage throughout the project and their desire for change is what has made this project an incredibly special one to be a part of.



# Wise About Words Evaluation Appendix

## Appendix A - Case study written by a WAW Artist

"There are children for whom participating in whole class activities is overwhelming, practically impossible. When I ran WAW small group sessions I watched children blossom in terms of their confidence, participation, and engagement with the stories.

Y has complex needs, 1to1 support and a history of very disruptive, destructive behaviour. Y was socially isolated in the class and prone to regular violent outbursts. Y had not been able to remain in any of the whole Wise About Words class sessions in the hall. Over the course of six small group sessions, I saw an extraordinary transformation. In the small group Y was chatty, forthcoming with ideas and expressive vocally and physically. Some weeks, Y bounded into the room and told me about the ideas they had been having about the Giant and his garden. Y became a leader in the room and their ideas were respected by peers. Eventually Y was able to return to the whole class sessions."

## Appendix B - Case study written by a Year 1 Teacher

"At the beginning of the year X found new situations or a change to routine tricky. X also tended to play alongside their peers rather than with them. X willingly joined the class in the hall for the very first drama session, but as it was quite noisy and busy. X found it all too much and took himself away and covered his ears. Then for the following sessions X would pop into the hall wearing ear defenders and would observe from afar.

X's confidence slowly began to grow, and we noticed that they were paying a lot more attention to what the artist and their peers were doing and as the sessions progressed X would take the ear defenders off and laugh along at what their peers were doing. Towards the end X would even call out ideas from where they were watching.

Then in the middle of the second term X spontaneously joined in for the whole session, including working with peers and X thoroughly enjoyed themselves. X had the biggest smile on their face and told me they had 'A big happy part.' This was a very proud moment for me and for X parents when I told them. From then on X joined in with all the sessions, including offering ideas to the artist and peers."

## Appendix C - Case Study written by Reception Teacher

"Y has speech and language issues and can be difficult to understand. Y would sit quietly during the class learning and needed encouragement to contribute.

Y played alongside others and interacted during play but was mostly reluctant to join in with directed tasks.





Through this project Y has improved their interactions with peers and teamwork skills, and now plays more regularly in a group negotiating play and ideas. Y clearly enjoys the WAW sessions and volunteers to join in and contribute. Y is more energetic through the WAW sessions, and the energy continues afterwards when they regularly extend the learning from the session through their chosen activity, usually construction, where their level of imagination and understanding of the session is clear."

#### **Appendix D - Case Study written by Reception Teacher**

"At the start of the project X lacked confidence in whole class situations and due to severe speech and language difficulties was wary to share ideas during carpet sessions. X would become very upset if they were unsure of what he was being asked to do and was reluctant to give new things a try.

X quickly became engaged and as the project progressed, X's confidence to engage in reading, writing and maths lessons increased. X can now discuss what they want to write and is able to form a short sentence.

X's confidence in their ability has grown. Now if X is not able to express themselves through words, they will express it with movement. X has made huge improvements throughout the year. X now shares ideas during whole class carpet sessions and will always put themselves forward to take the lead role in any active learning sessions. X is now seen in a positive way by peers."

#### **Appendix E - Reception and Year 1 Teacher Testimony**

"Essentially WAW is a bank of techniques which have become intrinsic to my approach when teaching. They are cross curricular, cross age range, fully inclusive methods which engage both teachers and learners collaboratively to bring learning to life.

WAW techniques enhance the curriculum which I am already delivering. They allow myself and the children within my class to have ownership of the learning experience. In turn this makes the lessons more meaningful and impactful on future learning and on the implementation of the skills which are acquired from these learning experiences. The children are able to draw down into the first-hand experiences we can offer them within their learning environment to further their understanding of key objectives, topics, and life skills.

I have had first-hand experience of this within my own classroom when using these techniques within the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. So many of the techniques support emotion coaching, allowing the children in my class to become more emotionally literate. The children have also become more tolerant and empathetic towards others with a greater understanding of their needs, feelings, and experiences.

WAW has been extremely successful and is now firmly established within my teaching practice. I thoroughly enjoy using the techniques creatively and can see the profoundly positive impact it has had for all of the children who have experienced learning using the WAW techniques."

#### **Appendix F - Reception Teacher Testimonial**

"It has been a real pleasure to be part of the Wise About Words project with Norwich Theatre. This has supported our links to emotion coaching; during this project we have noticed how children can express and discuss their own and others' emotions including empathising with characters in stories.

We have seen a real change in the confidence of all children, particularly our focus children who are now comfortable to speak and take on a role in front of the rest of the class. They are beginning to understand that making mistakes



is not wrong and that it is a way of learning and not a failure.

Through playing self-regulation activities ... children have developed focus and teamwork skills, and inhibitory control, even our youngest children have been able to grasp these techniques.

We feel we have been very well supported by our artist who goes above and beyond in every session and continues to support us as teachers and a school outside of these sessions. As a result of our very positive experience of this project we are excited to see this developing further in our school."

#### **Appendix G - Year 2 Teacher Testimonial**

"Since joining the Wise About Words project two years ago I have been able to adapt and develop my teaching practice to engage children in learning. The tools I have been given make me view my teaching practice from a unique perspective and allow me to be more creative with how I teach across the whole curriculum.

The children have written poems based on sessions taught on sound, movement, and collaboration; told stories using shadow puppets; met historical and book characters through hot seating; learnt about geographical differences using their bodies; learnt about the water cycle by becoming water droplets and so much more. Wise About Words gets children moving, thinking, sharing, and learning. This wonderful project has had a hugely positive impact on my professional development and therefore the children I teach."

#### **Appendix H - Year 3&4 Teacher Testimonial**

"This project has enabled me to interact with the children in new and positive ways- levelling the field for SEN and has been empowering for me and the children.

It has built my skills and confidence, allowing me to be more adventurous and creative; increasing my interest in the process of

teaching and learning.

I will use WAW across the curriculum and look forward to the challenge of how I can thread it through all areas. The toolkit will particularly help the "post covid" affected children to develop the skills that they have struggled to develop so far. ...it will be fundamental in my approach to help all children..... specifically some of the most vulnerable."

#### **Appendix I - Year 5 Lead Teacher Testimonial**

"I've always classed myself as a scientist and athlete. If someone had told me seven years ago that I would be sharing my enthusiasm and fondness for drama and the arts, I would have said they were mad. On the first day of WAW I was petrified at the thought of doing drama, but my opinions quickly changed.

I became a teacher because I care about the holistic development of our younger generations of children. This encompasses their social, emotional, physical, mental, and intellectual growth.

With this in mind, I felt it would be poignant to explore just some aspects that I felt have been most important over the duration of this project.

The first and the most important thing that WAW does, is it enables every child to have a voice. An example of this is when I posed the question 'what is a scientist?' to my class. They couldn't really tell me and couldn't really access in their own minds what a scientist is. So, I simply asked them to act out what a scientist does. Once my class had spent time silently performing and enabling others to identify what they could see and observe, we found that we had filled an entire whiteboard with suggestions to what a scientist is and it then enabled them to complete a writing task to answer that very simple question, rich in science vocabulary and specific terminology.

WAW allowed my children and also me to be vulnerable. To take ourselves out of our comfort zones and explore really challenging concepts



such as emotions, loss, racism, identity, and inequality, to name just a few. When exploring the incredible life of Walter Tull. It reached a point in the story where he had experienced racism from opposition fans when playing for Tottenham Hotspur against Bristol City. We explored his thoughts and feelings when confronted with these behaviours and attitudes by setting up a press conference, using an exercise called hot seating. This allowed the class (my reporters) to ask, a student posing as Walter Tull, questions to challenge how he was thinking and feeling. This then led to setting up a scene from the dressing room and exploring how his team mates also felt about it.

WAW is remarkably simple to drop into subjects across the primary curriculum. From using 1, 2, 3 maths (A simple rock, paper, scissors game that includes calculations) to clap, jump, chicken in PE. From using role play and acting as King Charles during his coronation service to

exploring character relationships as part of *The Tempest* in English. The beauty of this pedagogy is its simplicity and how it immerses students in their learning.

As I have experienced WAW, over the past two years, I have realised how the outcomes are so aligned when using both Wise about Words and Emotion Coaching. As educators, we aspire to have children that can show resilience, adaptability, creativeness, an ability to problem solve, empathy, and critical thinking. To me the outcomes are very much identical.

I know it works. Everyone from the project must now act as a catalyst to share and promote the outcomes that WAW can bring to our children. We must enable and empower our colleagues to use this approach in their classrooms and across our schools. We must continue to support children in growing their love of stories, enabling them to develop life skills and build emotional language enabling them to be the best that they can be."

#### **Appendix J - Reception Teacher Testimonial**

"Working on the Wise About Words project has been wonderful. The children involved have really become more confident and expressive, and this has impacted on their attitude and wellbeing across the curriculum.

There are a couple of poignant cases for me. One little boy has a difficult home life and early childhood trauma. When he was due to start school, his nursery suggested he had a 1-1 for behaviour and supporting him to sustain at an activity or task. His enthusiasm for the weekly sessions has been inspiring. He remembered a movement phrase to different music and supported other less confident children to have a go. We modelled a mirroring activity and the connection I felt with him will stay with me forever! When I copied his movements and watched him, his eyes glistened, his smile shone and his whole face lit up the room.

Another child came into our school and had spent a year at nursery not speaking. After a

few sessions he was able to wear the talking hat or use the magic microphone and share his own ideas about the characters and story, this has transferred into the classroom which is wonderful to see.

I know as a school we will continue to build on all the strategies.

I feel very lucky and I am glad that I have been involved in this project. I can now feel confident to answer the question, are schools killing creativity?

The answer is, absolutely not in our school! Our children and staff thrive on creativity."

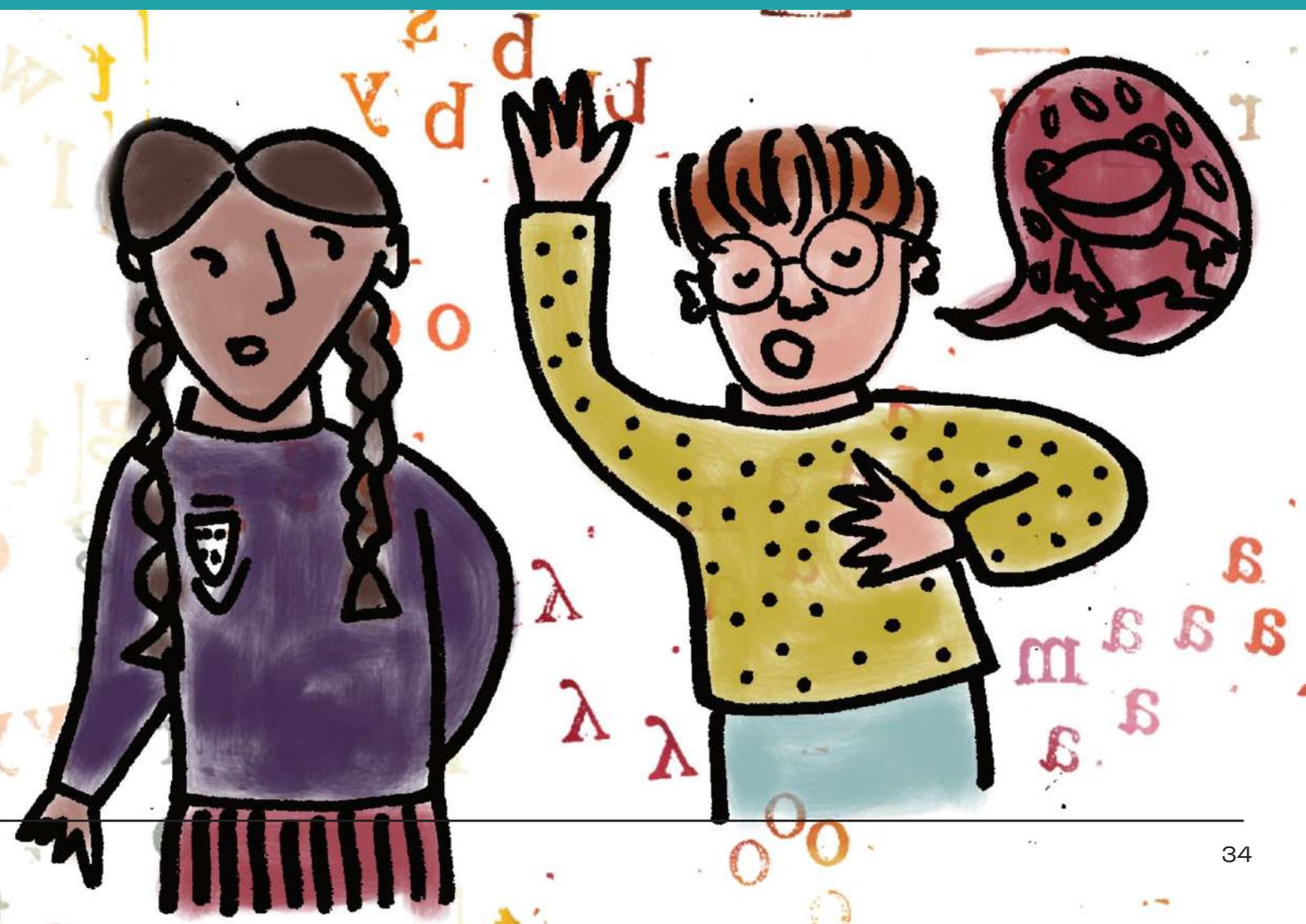
#### **Appendix K- Year 1&2 Teacher Testimonial**

"I am a KS1 teacher and I joined the WAW project in its second year. During the first year my colleague shared some excellent WAW practice with us, however, joining the programme has really opened my eyes to see how learning through drama games and techniques is so

beneficial in supporting our children's learning experience.

Working alongside the WAW team and sharing their enthusiasm has provided an opportunity to enrich our curriculum. I have watched children who have not always had the courage to participate, come alive as they have journeyed through a story and shared their thoughts and ideas. Both the WAW techniques and support we have been given, has enabled us to think creatively and be a bit brave as we hook children into a history, science, or geography topic.

It has been a privilege to share in the WAW project and I am excited about how we will continue to develop this within our planning and teaching. I am certain that our children will grow and thrive through the use of WAW for it gives them the opportunity to safely explore different emotions, develop their language skills and challenge themselves as they are able to access their learning in a bright, fresh way."





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