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Hanley, Christopher , Cooper, David  and Rowntree, Jennifer  (2024) The importance of experience: supporting pupils' creative writing about the natural world. *Changing English*. ISSN 1358-684X

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684x.2024.2379984>

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

Version: Published Version

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To cite this article: Christopher Hanley, David Cooper & Jennifer Rowntree (08 Aug 2024): The Importance of Experience: Supporting Pupils' Creative Writing About the Natural World, Changing English, DOI: [10.1080/1358684X.2024.2379984](https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2024.2379984)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2024.2379984>



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The Importance of Experience: Supporting Pupils' Creative Writing About the Natural World

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ABSTRACT

The first part of this article considers the challenge of supporting pupils to write creatively about the natural world. It examines a text by a gifted young writer: *Diary of a Young Naturalist* by Dara McAnulty. It asks what the challenges might be for pupils who may be motivated to model their writing on McAnulty's, but have limited experience of the natural world. Drawing on the scholarly work of John Dixon, Robert Eaglestone and others, the article highlights the importance of pupil *experience* in the formation of their writerly voice, thereby emphasising the need for writing pedagogies that deepen and enrich pupils' experiences. In the second part, the authors present a series of interdisciplinary activities that are intended to enrich pupil *experiences*, and ultimately encourage creativity. The plan is aimed at pupils in Manchester in the north-west of England, but the activities can be adapted to work in other locations.

KEYWORDS

Creative writing; pupil experience; Manchester poplar; Dara McAnulty

Introduction

This article reflects upon the importance of experience in the formation of a writer's voice. The particular focus is creative writing about the natural world; the aim is to support teachers who want to encourage their pupils in that direction. The article examines a recent book by a young author in which the natural world is celebrated: *Diary of a Young Naturalist*, by Dara McAnulty. It asks what makes the writing so compelling, and what the challenges might be for pupils who want to model their writing on McAnulty's example.

This is contextualised by a discussion of contemporary writing practices in English schools. Writing pedagogies, including creative writing pedagogies, have become dominated by highly structured approaches that make it easier to assess but leave little room for the pupils to take risks or develop an independent voice. Whilst it is important for the pupils to learn about writerly techniques, they must also exercise their creative judgement when deploying them in their writing.

Drawing on the scholarly writings of John Dixon, Robert Eaglestone and others, the paper then presents a discussion of educational *experience*. In John Dewey's formulation, truly educative experiences enable the pupil to approach future experiences with greater

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awareness and extract greater value from them ('an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes' (Dewey 1938, 38)). Many stories are constructed according to an identifiable pattern, using common techniques (Storr 2019); however, the exercising of writerly judgement is indispensable to the creative writing process, and this is dependent upon the pupils' *experience*.

Following an introduction to McAnulty's *Diary of a Young Naturalist*, the authors consider what the challenges might be for a young writer hoping to emulate those effects. McAnulty's descriptions of his nature experiences are mesmerising: Close observation is intertwined with memory, scientific knowledge and a passionate desire to protect the natural world. In contrast, pupils may be motivated to write but their knowledge and experience of the natural world may be limited, making it difficult for them to simply 'model' their work on McAnulty's.

This leads to the second part of the article, in which the authors present a curriculum plan that is intended to enrich pupils' nature experiences and encourage their creativity. The plan is partly derived from our reading of contemporary nature texts like McAnulty's, partly from our pedagogic knowledge of what is likely to engage pupils, and partly from our experiences of current creative writing practices in schools. We analysed McAnulty's text to determine what experiences lay behind the authorial voice, and we identified six aspects: 'noticing and remembering', 'caring and responding', 'recording and knowing'. We devised activities to support pupils in all these aspects and, following informal conversations with school and university colleagues, we adjusted them to their current form.

The plan focusses on Manchester in the north-west of England. A city with a rich industrial heritage, Manchester is now benefitting from intensive tree planting and other 'green' innovations. A particular tree, the black ('Manchester') poplar enjoys something of an iconic status in the city; in the curriculum plan it provided a focal point for interdisciplinary activities in three thematic areas (storytelling, activism, science).

Thus, the curriculum plan represents a 'reply' to the challenge we presented in the paper's first section: How can pupils model their writing on exciting young authors such as McAnulty, who can readily draw on stores of knowledge and experience of the natural world? With the rationale provided in the next few sections, and the curriculum plan itself in the second half, the paper offers teachers a way of thinking about the issues that can help them to encourage their pupils' creative responses to nature.

Creative writing in schools

This section briefly considers changes to writing pedagogies in recent years, which in England have become increasingly 'examinations proofed' in response to performance pressures.

Gibbons (2017, 2019) describes changes in the English curriculum in the last thirty-five years that, with the arrival of the National Curriculum in 1989 and National Literacy Strategy in the 1990s, encouraged writing pedagogies that are rooted in literacy and genre-based approaches. In the context of increasing teacher performance management

and high-pressure accountability through examination results and school league tables, writing pedagogies now ‘forefront structure over content and, intentionally or not, make students’ writing assessable in more straightforward ways’ (Gibbons 2019, 39). Gibbons argues that the prevalence of such ‘exam-proofed’ approaches is understandable, given the very real pressures teachers face to ensure examinations success (2019, 42–43). But there is little evidence of writing practices in which pupils are free to take their time over the drafting process, feel secure in making mistakes, or to reflect meaningfully on their emergent identities as writers.

Gibbons’ views are widely reflected in current research literature. With creative writing, the particular focus of this article, it seems that a structure-first, ‘assessment-proofed’ approach to creativity is also prevalent in many English schools (Barrs 2019; Lambirth 2018; Thomas 2019). Thomas, for example, describes a lesson in which pupils were encouraged to identify ‘effective’ techniques and employ them in their writing, which was assessed on the basis of how many techniques were included (51). Pupils are cautious in their approaches, overly concerned with correctness and compliance (Turvey, Yandell, and Ali 2012; Warbrick 2023). Lacking from this kind of approach is the opportunity for pupils to develop writerly judgement through the confident use (or non-use) of techniques when it has most effect. Pupils may be inducted into mistaken notions, as if a writerly technique such as using a ‘powerful’ adjective will have impact however it is used, regardless of context (Hanley and Olsson Rost 2020). Such an approach pays little regard to the potential in creative writing to be a medium of self-expression, personal growth or social engagement (Gilbert 2021), in which the pupil’s experiences, and their reflections upon them, are central to the process.

The centrality of personal experience in creativity

In this section, we briefly consider the value of pupil experience to support creativity in English classrooms.

Pupils will be likely to engage in a task when they feel some sense of personal connection, or find their own experiences in some way reflected in it (Fleming and Stevens 2010; Heathcote 2023). In his famous work, *Growth through English* (1969), John Dixon talks about the intimate connection between experience and language. Language is the medium through which each pupil fashions a world of experience for themselves and establishes a stable relationship with the outside world. ‘Growth’ takes place as the pupil senses the need to push at the limits of their current understanding and find new linguistic forms to express themselves. As Dixon puts it, there is linguistic growth as we ‘shoulder – if we dare – the task of making it afresh, extending it, reshaping it, and bringing it into new relationships with old elements’ (9). *Growth through English* contains many examples of how this might happen in classrooms, such as the teaching of texts that engage the pupils’ deepest attention (for example, 34–49).

Echoing John Dixon’s insights about experience and linguistic growth, in *Doing English* (2017), Robert Eaglestone highlights an intimate connection between the activity of ‘doing’ English and personal identity. Humans are continually seeking a better form of words for the meaning they wish to convey: ‘We judge, shape and think about language all the time, so much so that we often just forget we are doing it’ (37). This kind of

ongoing linguistic inquiry is also present in a reader's approach to a piece of literature. The questions they ask about their everyday life apply equally to their interrogation of the text: 'What does it mean? Why say this rather than that? Why does that make me feel this way? Why is that so beautiful? What does it remind me of?' (37). There is a significant overlap between the languages of everyday life and literary study, and they share a common root in the individual's experience.

With creative writing, the choices of language may be more deliberate than in everyday experience, but the principle remains the same: The writer is seeking a new, creative way to capture something unique about experience (including experience belonging to someone else, like a fictional character). Just as in daily life people push at the limits of their language to discover what they really want to say, so doing creative writing is also a way of grappling with the limits of creativity itself: 'What is at issue with creative writing is not just that it is a mode of thought but *how* it thinks, as it were – what its tools are' (121).

The 'tools' of creative writing can be thought of as *techniques*. The authors do not want to minimise the efforts of teachers in instilling good technical writing habits in their pupils. As May (2007) points out, 'all stories share basic patterns, however complex, beautiful or convoluted the telling' (12). To express their creativity effectively, the pupils need to possess a repertoire of writerly 'tools'. If we asked the pupils just to 'write something creative' with no further guidance about how to do it, it would rightly be considered bad advice. But even if well supported with a repertoire of techniques and structures, the pupils would still need to make judgements about the best approach, and this would inevitably depend upon their prior experiences of the kinds of situations, places or people they wanted to write about, as well as their knowledge of how other writers have deployed the techniques in the past (see May 2007, 92–94). In other words, experience is intrinsic to the formation of the pupil's writerly voice.

With this in mind, we now turn to a recent example of creative, descriptive narrative in which the natural world is valued and celebrated. Dara McAnulty's website describes the young writer as 'a multi-award winning autistic author, naturalist and conservationist from Northern Ireland' (McAnulty 2024). His book *Diary of a Young Naturalist* is a first-person work of creative non-fiction that has won several awards; the jacket carries recommendations from celebrated writers in that field, such as Robert Macfarlane and Chris Packham. The book is presented in the form of a diary that, beginning in the spring, marks the four changing seasons, ending a few days before the author's fifteenth birthday. It records the author's deeply personal connection with nature and high-profile activism, for example being invited by TV presenter Chris Packham to address thousands of people at a rally in Hyde Park, London. *Diary of a Young Naturalist* could be compelling to pupils of a similar age, and in the next section, we identify elements of the text on which pupils could model their own writing. These are: 'noticing and remembering', 'caring and responding', 'recording and knowing'. Later in the paper, these aspects of 'experience' are linked to the curriculum activities.

In this article we selected *Diary of a Young Naturalist* as an example of accessible writing that might resonate with pupils. Other texts by young authors might be equally compelling, such as *Birdgirl* by Mya-Rose Craig. Also of interest by older authors might be an overtly political text such as *On Gallows Down* by Nicola Chester, or for older students Robert Macfarlane's *Underland*.

Diary of a Young Naturalist

Noticing and remembering

McAnulty's narrator (a textualised version of himself) often voices wonder and fascination for the natural world. In one passage, while exploring a castle's grounds near a lake, the narrator observes, 'A wall is an entire world to an insect, a universe brimming with life in winter. Looking closely, noticing, brings everything to life' (McAnulty 2020, 206). He is watching an earwig patrolling her batch of 'butter-yellow' eggs, which reminds him of an earlier scene in his Belfast garden. He remembers, 'I lay on my belly and tuned in, utterly transfixed' as an earwig and centipede did battle. 'I don't know how long it took, but the earwig stabbed the centipede on one side'. An unsentimental reflection soon follows, as he observes, 'I wasn't upset by the death, knowing it was nature. Balance. Order in a wall-shaped universe' (207).

The absence of sentimentality and insistence on clear, dynamic description is very appealing to the reader. Another remembered scene by a lakeside provides some wonderful description of animal movement. The narrator is looking at a line of trees as he observes, 'It was two years ago when a pair of male hen harriers shot out of the trees like arrows'. He continues, 'shouldering and sparkling against the purple heather. Glinting, rising, dancing, tumbling' (96). The listing of verbs is very suggestive. It does not describe the creatures but captures their movement, and might be an interesting, unusual approach for pupils wanting to develop their writing.

Caring and responding

At points throughout *Diary of a Young Naturalist*, McAnulty talks about the effect of his autism on his relationship with nature. He says, 'It calms and soothes: gathering information, finding patterns, sequencing and sorting out' (140). The book describes his troubles with friendships and particularly bullies, and reactions to his postings on social media ('the words they used to congratulate or criticise me seemed to grow larger and larger on the screen' (108)). The narrator's honesty about anxieties at school will probably resonate with many pupils. Readers might not share the author's delight in nature, but perhaps empathise with the need for solace and security while not feeling understood ('When I'm sitting and watching, grown-ups usually ask if I'm okay' ... 'Wildlife never disappoints like people can' (63)).

McAnulty's activism is a prominent feature of the book, as is his passionate desire to 'stand up for wildlife, shout loudly about the wondrous things I've seen and learnt' (171). He enjoys such a high public profile that McAnulty acts as a speaker at the first Irish gathering of Extinction Rebellion (169). Pupils might well be able to relate to the global message about the climate crisis and loss of wildlife ('My generation will experience the worst of it' (169)); but the *local* activism might feel more hopeful and accessible to a young reader and potential activist. There is an account of an 'eco group' set up by McAnulty and his brother at their school, along with fifteen other children of different ages (170–171) which young readers could hope to emulate.

Recording and knowing

There are passages that transition from personal experiences to scientific details and explanations that point to a rich store of knowledge underlying the authorial voice. For example, in one mesmeric descriptive passage about silver Y moths swarming around a buddleia plant in the darkness, the narrator reflects, 'I find it fascinating that silver Y fur can confuse the sonar readings of bats, and even when they are predated they can escape, leaving the bat with a mouthful of undressed scales' (114). The scientific knowledge, handled with a light touch, undoubtedly enhances the descriptive effect of the passage and indicates the extraordinary depth of writerly skill. In another passage, the scientific language is selectively used to enhance the directness and economy of description. On a forest walk, the narrator sees some fungus growing on the stump of a beech tree. Drawing closer to the protrusions of fungus, he describes them as 'Envoys of decay, polypores, oscillators of the forest'. He then observes 'a ladybird, shining brightly against some *Xanthoria* lichen, like sun bursting from a branch' (160).

This aspect of McAnulty's style, in which science is interwoven with enthralling description, is perhaps the most challenging for the pupils to emulate, as it requires capability across two disciplines (English and science), and knowledge of how to blend those knowledges together. We return to this issue in later sections of the paper.

Summary

Diary of a Young Naturalist is a fascinating choice to support creative writing about nature in secondary English classrooms. The authors identified some 'techniques' that pupils could experiment with, including close observation, or 'noticing', and using verbs to capture the dynamic movement of animals. It is obvious that McAnulty's narrator's linguistic effects are underpinned by a wealth of experience and scientific knowledge, and a dazzling command of language. But it is a safe assumption that many pupils will not feel such a strong connection to the natural world, and their knowledge and first-hand experience of it may be limited. Pupils might be willing to model their writing on McAnulty's (or another writer's), but without deeper experiences of nature and nature writing to reflect upon, if they have not spent time closely observing nature and discussing it with their peers, or if relevant scientific knowledge is lacking, pupils will lack confidence in their use of such 'techniques'. It seems likely that the creative process could become 'over-scaffolded' by the teacher, in the way we described earlier in the paper.

The authors outlined a challenge in the first part of this paper. How can teachers support pupils with their creative writing about the natural world? In the second part of the paper, we respond to that challenge, by describing a curriculum plan that will give pupils knowledge and experience of nature; opportunities to use language creatively and imaginatively; chances to forge a personal connection with nature, and to develop their scientific abilities. From our reading of McAnulty's text, we identified the following aspects of experience that we linked to the curriculum activities: 'noticing and remembering', 'caring and responding', 'recording and knowing'.

The storytelling activities (noticing, remembering) will encourage the pupils' sense of personal connection with the natural world in their home city. With the activism tasks (caring, responding), the pupils will feel some responsibility for the natural world where

they live. The science activities (recording, knowing) were devised by one of the authors, a plant geneticist, and will provide the pupils with concrete knowledge about trees.

One of the authors is co-director of the Centre for Place Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. Place is partly an *experience of place*, in the sense that for each of us, our experiences of living and being somewhere form a unique pattern; ‘a network of communication lines with intermittent assembly points; and it cannot be located on a map’ (Raban 1974 quoted in Dee 2018, 4). In the curriculum plan, the idea of ‘place’ is foregrounded in two ways; firstly, in the city of Manchester, its history and green spaces; secondly, in the lived experiences of the pupils, in local places they know and care about. Together, these approaches to place provided a pathway into exploring the pupils’ experiences of nature.

Following many informal discussions with school and university colleagues, the activities have been adjusted to their current form. With its focus on an iconic local black (‘Manchester’) poplar tree, the curriculum plan aims primarily at Manchester schools, but as the activities centre on pupil *experiences* of place, they can be quite easily adapted to other locations.

In the next section, we provide a brief history of the Manchester poplar, including current efforts to restore its dwindling presence in the city. Then we briefly describe the curriculum plan, which uses the idea of belonging to a ‘place’ – in both senses – as focal points for activities about the natural world.

The Manchester poplar: a very brief history

The history of the tree, intimately connected with the city’s past, is a resonant image of the city’s industrial heritage and greener future.

Being resistant to airborne toxins from industry, these trees began to grow in parks and on roadsides, alongside canals and in public squares. In 1915 alone, one nearby nursery in Carrington, Cheshire, produced 25,000 black poplar saplings destined for Manchester (Cooper 2006). In the 1930s, unemployment levels were unprecedentedly high in Manchester, as elsewhere, as a result of the Great Depression (Cooper 2006, 49). In an effort to get people back into work, the Manchester Parks and Cemeteries Committee – with the support of the national government – hired local men to head out on bikes. Carrying small iron bars, and bunches of saplings cut from a single tree, the men were tasked with planting black poplars around Manchester.

In the early 2000s, the Manchester poplars became infected with a fungal disease, the poplar scab (*Venturia populina*), which ultimately results in the death of the tree. Many of the individual trees in the city were clones of a single specimen, which helped facilitate the impact of the infection and resulted in the felling of many trees (Long 2009). Over the past few years, painstaking efforts have begun to restore Manchester’s black poplars (Manchester City of Trees 2020). The National Trust worked with local organisations and communities on an ambitious project to create an urban skypark in the city centre, which opened to the public in July 2022 (National Trust n.d.). Many of the species planted by the gardeners and their team of volunteers have local connections including cotton grass, native ferns to be found in the herbarium collections at Manchester Museum, and – saliently – *Manchester poplars*.

Curriculum strand one: storytelling (noticing and remembering)

Keen to capitalise on the Manchester poplar's local revival in the public consciousness, the authors commissioned a professional storyteller to re-tell the story of the tree for a contemporary audience. The story, which was entitled *Ambrose and the Manchester Poplar Tree*, is set in industrial Manchester in 1912. It was inspired by the tree's real history (see this paper's previous section); many details such as 1930s re-planting scheme were woven into the narrative. It tells of Ambrose, a working-class boy from Ancoats, who loves the one great tree growing near his house under a smog-choked sky (Ancoats is an industrialised area to the northeast of the city centre). Ambrose visits the tree; he confides in it and it gives him reassurance; one night it seems to magically save his sick mother's life. Then, in a violent twist of fate, it is struck by lightning. The tree splits in two and the hope vanishes from Ambrose's young life until many years later. Now a grown man, in need of money to support his frail parents, he joins a scheme to re-plant the city with poplar trees. He saves the healthiest sapling to replace the tree that was lost, and it too becomes his ally. Eventually Ambrose dies of old age and a new family moves into their house. A child called Tessa climbs up in the new tree's branches and starts to confide her hopes and dreams to it as Ambrose did many years earlier.

The story is about Ambrose's unfulfilled life in the city's industrial past, and the continuity with the present time (embodied in the image of the tree), which is more hopeful. After reading the story, a number of preparatory activities will provide the pupils with *experiences* (noticing and remembering) to help them develop their personal response to nature in the city and think about the city's collective memory. Then there are suggestions to help develop their creative writing in class, which will draw on the preparatory activities.

Noticing

Do you have a favourite tree at home, on the way to school or in a park? What is it like to see/touch/smell? Experiment with moving closer in and further away, sketch it and find different words for the colours, textures, aromas, etc. Look closely at a leaf or in the soil. What life can you find?

Noticing/remembering

During a couple of weeks, on your walk home, or around your area, create a map of the different emotions you have experienced from place to place. Draw the places you have visited and link a feeling with each one. Reflect back on times you have spent alone or with friends. Try to remember states of mind and emotions. What are the memories connected to trees or green spaces? Add these memories to your map.

Remembering the past (imagining)

Revisit parts of the story about the city's industrial past. Imagine talking to an old tree in the city. What would it say if you asked it about how life around it had changed over time? (The poplar tree was resistant to pollution and could tell you about the transformation of the air quality!)

Developing creative writing in class

Do some free writing, in any genre, about your experience of your favourite tree. Don't 'over-think' it. You could for example make a simple poem from sensory experiences, with sentence starters in the style 'I can see . . . I can feel . . . I can smell . . . I can hear . . . all around me is . . . ' (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)).

Next, you could describe in more detail the moment of picking something up and describe how it feels in your hand, what you notice, what you did with it, etc. Then you could 'tell the story' of that moment, by describing how you felt, who you were with, what you were doing, or what someone said. Using your emotion and memory map, describe your changing feelings in different places, and express those feelings in your description of trees, animals or other things – for example, you might feel soothed by the rustling sound of a tree; seeing a spider might make you curious about its movements, purposes or surroundings. You could draw on your memories to help you talk about changes in the environment, for example changes in the look and sound of a place due to the changing seasons, or differences in your state of feeling about a place. Alternatively, you could anticipate things that haven't yet happened: You could talk about your habits or routines when you go to specific places – what you typically like to do and what you will be doing next.



Figure 1. The black poplar's richly textured bark.

With the ‘old tree in Manchester’ activity, you could create a dialogue in which the tree answers your questions about the changing city. Imagine the personality of the tree’s voice. Is it happy? Enthusiastic? Forgetful? Before you begin, rehearse the scene with a partner. What do you really want to find out about? Imagine some interesting details that the tree has witnessed and wants to talk about.

Curriculum strand two: caring and responding

Without diminishing the role of personal meanings, here the emphasis is on *public* responsibility. The activities in this section maintain the focus on a specific place, while encouraging the pupils to become better informed about local efforts to tackle the climate crisis, to talk to their peers and adopt a collective stance on the issues.

Manchester City of Trees is an organisation dedicated to planting trees and restoring woodlands in Greater Manchester. Their goal is to plant three million trees in five years: one for every person in the city-region. Their website (<https://www.cityoftrees.org.uk>) includes an ongoing request for volunteers (which may be of interest to pupils). *Manchester City of Trees* is part of a larger organisation, *The Northern Forest*. It stretches west to east in the north of England, introducing fifty million new trees to an area that includes the post-industrial cities of Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Hull (a map is freely available on their website, (<https://thenorthernforest.org.uk>)). This area is currently much less wooded than the England average (7.6% cover as opposed to 13%, which is itself one of the lowest in Europe).

A large number of free websites provide information in pupil-friendly formats about tree carbon storage, greenhouse gas emissions, flood mitigation, noise reduction and other science relating to the benefits of trees (for example the ‘science and environment’ pages of BBC news). During a preliminary high school visit, pupils were especially interested in carbon-dioxide emissions linked to their lifestyle. Many ‘carbon footprint calculator’ tools are freely available online (for example by the World Wildlife Fund or the United Nations carbon offset platform) to establish the pupils’ own footprint and offset it against the carbon sequestration capacity of local trees (using Treezilla, see science activities below). In a location other than Manchester, teachers can also contact their local council about their green strategy and ask for contact details of local activist groups. Preparatory activities:

Caring and responding

Talk to your peers in a group. Find a tree in the school grounds or nearby. Each of you should focus on one aspect of the tree that makes you hopeful (biodiversity, carbon storage, impact on flooding, noise and air temperature, mental health, etc). Research your aspect and present it to your group.

Developing creative writing in class

(Here, the pupils can draw on the narrative they created in curriculum strand one, but they will also be producing new non-fictional writing with the aim of informing and persuading their target audience).

In your group, create a multi-media presentation (including descriptive, discursive and persuasive text, as well as audio and visual clips) that will give older people insight about how young people experience and enjoy trees. Drawing on your research in the last activity, explain how and why trees make young people hopeful. If you would like to see more trees in your city, say where they could be planted, and why it matters.

Decide which ideas will have most impact on your audience. Consider how to engage older people and help them to understand what matters to you. Begin by deciding what are your key messages, and how to communicate these most effectively.

Try to connect personal experience with the wider issues. For example, you could use snippets of writing about your favourite tree, combined with new informative and persuasive text about the benefits of trees, that is crafted for your target audience. Try to enable your audience to visualise the information. For example, you could include photographs of your favourite tree and explain its personal meaning to you, then invite the audience to reflect on their own relationship with the natural world, before explaining the wider social benefits of trees.



Figure 2. The black poplar's characteristic leaning habit.

Curriculum strand three: science and hopefulness (recording and knowing)

The Manchester poplar teaches us about the impact of human intervention. Nationally, the black poplars are scarce because the wet meadows in which they thrive have been drained and many rivers have been canalised and engineered. Humans have propagated and moved species around, partly to deal with the impact of pollution that manufacturing has generated (Cooper 2006). Through this, reproductive strategies have been manipulated, implementing a large male bias in the extant population of black poplars and reducing genetic diversity to relatively few clones (Adams 2010; Cottrell, A'Hara, and Adams 2018). The limited numbers of clones propagated and planted around Manchester and the UK likely facilitated the spread of disease, when the poplar scab decimated the population.

The story of the Manchester poplar also teaches us about hope. They were planted in Manchester because of their ability to survive in the polluted environment. Living and dead, they also support other species through habitat and food provision. Growing, they contribute to climate mitigation by removing carbon dioxide from the air. Through the stories of the black poplar, we can also learn about the carbon cycle, and the interdependence of humans and the natural world. Activities:

Recording and knowing

Find some black poplar trees (or other species) near to you. Following the methods at treezilla.org, estimate the height of the tree. Measure the circumference of the tree at a height of 150 cm from the ground and calculate the tree's diameter. With these measurements you can estimate the volume of the tree and then upload your data onto the Treezilla database which will then estimate the amount of carbon stored in your tree and the other ecosystem services it provides.

Recording and knowing

Find a black poplar or other tree near to you. Look carefully on the trunk, lower branches and the ground underneath. Can you see any other organisms near to or on the tree? Take photos of these and upload them to the citizen science wildlife recording website or app iNaturalist (<https://www.inaturalist.org>). How many organisms can you find? What taxonomic group do these belong to? If it is in the spring or summer, look for flowers and fruit on the trees. Can you tell if this tree is male or female from the flowers? [Clue: male inflorescences have red and female greeny-yellow flowers in the spring. The seed pods (on female trees) are filled with cottony fluff around the seeds in the summer] (see [Figures 3 and 4](#)).

These activities are interesting for their own sake, *as science*. Science offers new aspects, insights, facts and knowledge about the Manchester poplar that will galvanise further creativity. With McAnulty's prose, we saw that scientific knowledge formed an important part of the *personal* connection with nature. Equally, pupils doing these activities are taking an active approach to science, enriching their personal tree experiences and not simply learning about trees as abstract entities.



Figure 3. The black poplar's seedpods with fluffy cotton cushioning.



Figure 4. The black poplar's red male catkins.

Developing creative writing in class

Measures of tree diameter and height tell us something about the ages of individual trees, the quality of the environment they are growing in and the carbon they have taken in and stored. Knowing about this could help pupils with the story about an old tree witnessing changes over time (in the 'noticing and remembering' section). It will help pupils to imagine what the tree says about the carbon it stores, where it comes from and might yet end up.

Here, pupils are learning how to write from a perspective quite different from their own – the voice of the old tree. They can also utilise these skills in the next activity.

By observing and recording information about the tree and the other organisms around, pupils can begin to build up a picture of the full life of the tree. This opens up further creative possibilities; for example, the story of a blackbird or thrush that claims the tree as a part of its territory; alternatively, the same story from the perspective of worms in the roots or grubs under the leaves. It can be written in the first person. Again, the pupils will be adopting a perspective that is very different from their own. They will begin by imagining the life of the creature: what it eats, sees, does, fears and cares about, in the context of its dependency on the habitat provided by its host tree.

Conclusion

In the second part of this paper, we responded to a challenge laid down in the first: How to support pupils who may be motivated to write but do not have the personal connection, knowledge and *experience* to model their writing on gifted young authors such as Dara

McAnulty. We provided an interdisciplinary curriculum plan that placed pupil experience at the centre. It provided pupils with opportunities to notice and reflect upon their own sensory experience of trees; to notice and record their emotional memories; to imagine their city as it used to be and speculate about how it has changed; to find out more about local trees and take an activist stance in groups, and to actively increase their scientific knowledge about trees where they live. Taken together, these experiences can help pupils to develop their own creative voice.

The activities focus on Manchester but could be adapted by teachers in other locations. First, they might want to identify a nature text that really speaks to them (like *Diary of a Young Naturalist* did with us) and analyse the kinds of experience embodied within it. They could identify an iconic plant or animal in their area (like the Manchester poplar with us) that can serve as a central image, around which other activities (storytelling, activism, science, etc.) can be constructed, whilst also tapping into pupils' connection to *place*.

In the first part of the paper, we suggested that it is not common practice in English schools for pupils to be allowed to take time with their writing, take risks and develop an independent voice. Supported by the works of Dewey, Dixon and Eaglestone, we argued that the effective use of writerly technique requires writerly judgement, which necessitates depth of *experience*. Thus, in addition to the plan, we provided teachers with a way of thinking about creativity that focusses primarily on building up pupils' knowledge and experiences, and only secondarily on teaching them 'technique'.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank storyteller Susie Oldfield and Manchester City of Trees for its inspirational work in the city.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Natural Environment Research Council [NE/V021370/1].

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