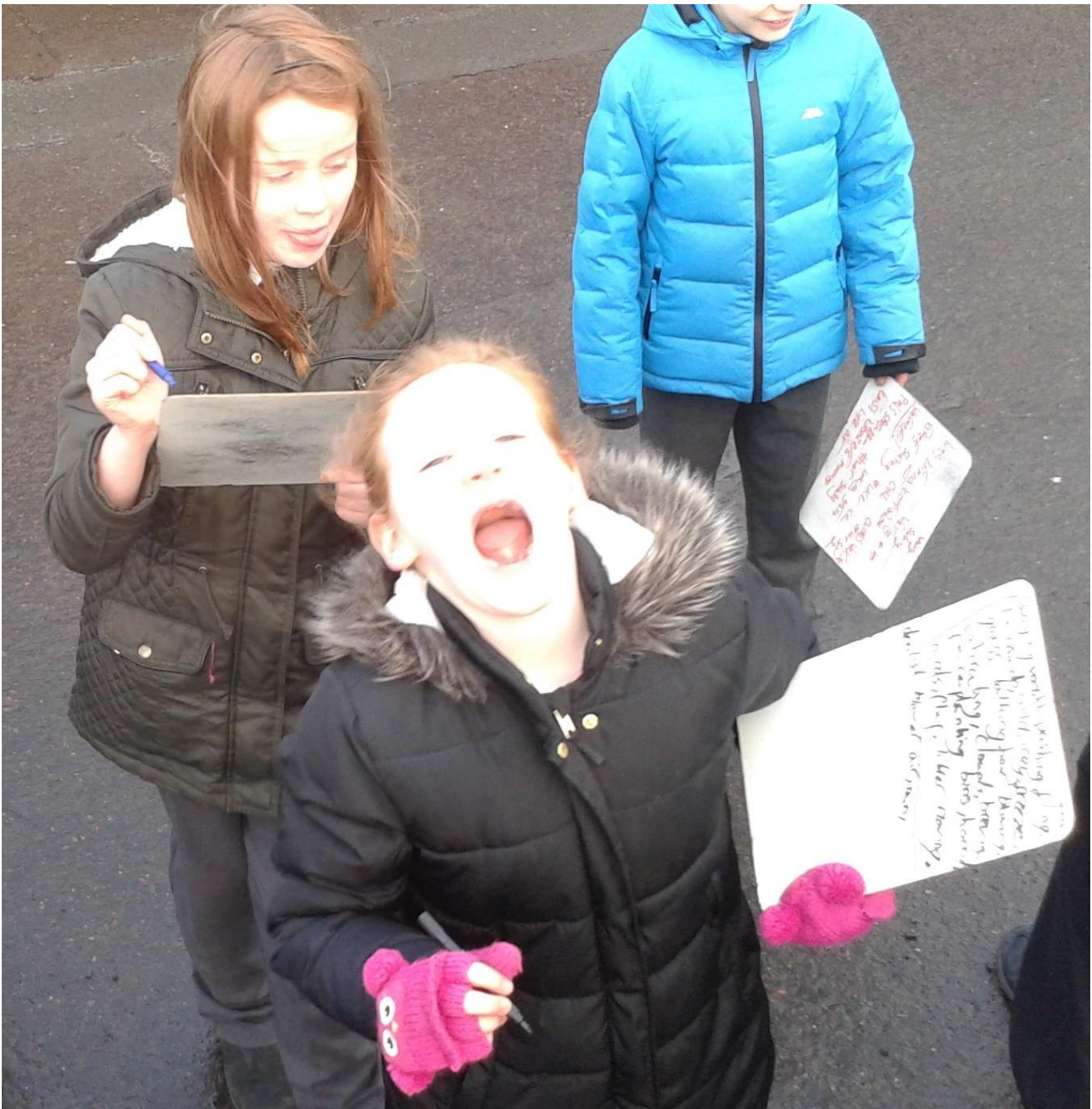


# Williamston: Tasting a storm

(Attainment in Literacy)



HIDDEN  
GIANTS



West Lothian  
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Transforming lives through learning

CREATIVE  
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NETWORKS



## Executive Summary

Hidden Giants undertook a three month residency in Williamston Primary school, Livingston, working with a class group of Primary 5 pupils and their teacher to explore how literacy and writing skills could be improved through creative approaches to learning and teaching. We collaborated with 22 P5 pupils and their teacher for two contact hours on consecutive Tuesday mornings, before lunchtime.

We took the view that simply devoting more classroom time to writing and the attendant literacy competencies of spelling, punctuation and grammar was not the solution to bring about tangible, measureable improvements. Rather, through a series of **creative, participatory, experiential diversions** the pupils were encouraged to think differently about what they could write about. As the pupils acquired an intrinsic motivation for writing, they began to regard the development of literacy skills and competencies as authentically purposeful and genuinely useful for the completion of their collaborative and individual projects.

Applying the Scottish Criterion Scale, there was a **significant and measurable improvement in the pupils' writing** based on two pieces of text at the beginning and end of the project. Word counts were significantly greater in the writing produced at the end of our residency. We conclude this was because pupils simply had more to say; as one pupil told us, the group now have the enduring knowledge that 'ideas are everywhere'. This enhanced desire to write has been facilitated through the pupils' increased vocabularies, and enhanced competencies with adjectives in extended descriptive sentences. Within the school, the P4 pupils' achievements have been recognised by their class teacher and head teacher, which has served to generate invaluable self-esteem for all. We believe the legacy of our creative intervention is twofold: for the pupils, an enhanced appetite for writing and a receptiveness for the continued acquisition of more literacy skills. For staff, an understanding through first-hand experience of the **value of creative approaches to learning and teaching within the curriculum for excellence**.





## Our Approach: Curriculum as lived-experience

We wanted to find out if the pupils could develop an authentic sense of purpose for writing - would they regard the acquisition of literacy skills and competencies as useful and necessary to fulfil their own intrinsically-motivated story-telling ambitions? To do this we worked **outside in the elements, listened to music, deconstructed movies, recorded our own voices and illustrated our own short animated films.**

### Tasting the wind

Storm Henry battered the UK in February 2016. In the days immediately after the storm, pupils were invited to go outside into the school grounds to experience the turbulent weather. They were asked to undertake a series of creative tasks that focused on specific senses: taste the wind, close your eyes and listen to the storm, look for the storm, etc. This **evocative experience propelled them to write** and draw on their white boards to be used as stimulus for a writing task back in the classroom.



*There were no children in the playground so every tree, litter and cloud was a loan. The stinky litter was having a horrible time in the mini-tornados, the birds were waving and being pushed around in the wind, the lonely clouds were being pulled in the trembling wind and finally the poor trees were shouting 'HELP .. . HELP . .. help' while their poor baby leaves were being pulled off the branches. After the storm the playground was dead. It was like horrid Henry came to ruin lives. So sad. Everything was miserable. Pupil*

### Seeing sounds



We heightened the pupils' listening, seeing and thinking skills by scaffolding their exploratory experience of interpreting visual, aural and kinaesthetic art.

We asked the pupils: "What do you see, hear, feel and think?" To introduce another perspective, we asked what the artists might have been thinking about.

As the pupils became confident with 'reading' art they became playful and experimental with the language used to describe new pieces. Together we created tasks encouraging them to describe

art to each other and hone in on words that would help someone who had never seen the piece to understand the content and context.

*"A lady in front of mountains, grass, a path and trees with soldiers coming for her. She is wearing a red dress" Pupil in response to listening to piece of music*

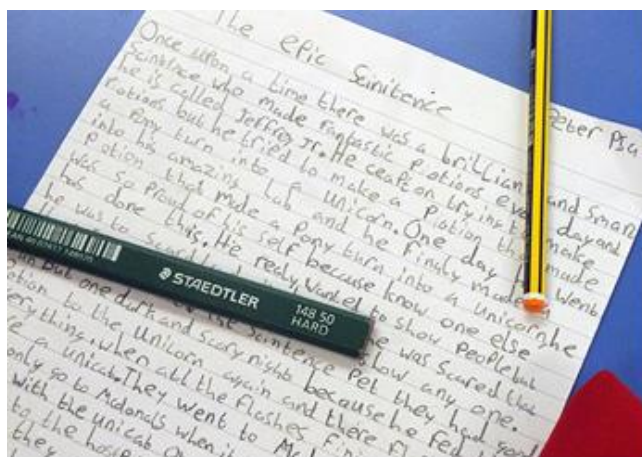
*“War is a grassy place. Everyone is carrying an umbrella, their wearing black, there is no happiness for miles. It’s raining. It’s thunder. It’s lighting. Everyone is crying. Two people are on top of a mountain. They see a dark sky with stars. Exhaustion has overwhelmed the couple. They have been walking for a year. They have come from the forest chased by the soldiers sent to kill them.” Pupils in response to piece of music.*

## Short films

We gave the pupils a simple six-stage story structure which enabled them to produce a short story in five industrious minutes. Pupils read their stories aloud to their peers and took the feedback to develop further develop their ideas. We wrote more stories in small groups and made audio recordings of the pupils performing them. Inspired by this experience, the pupils produced illustrations to turn their collaborative stories into short films.

We premiered these final ‘master’ story-films to the whole group, a second class of P5 pupils and the Head Teacher. As a conclusion to the film project, we asked the pupils individually to rewrite the collaborative story they had worked on. The difference in **comparison with the writing before our intervention was significant**. The pupils’ concentration and application to the task was much improved. Their most recent written stories were noticeably longer and more sophisticated in terms of perspective, character development, context of imagined world, and humor.

## A return to writing



Our creative, participatory, and experiential activities were all part of a deliberate strategy to introduce embodied, creative experiences into the writing process. This strategy enabled thoughts and activities which supported writing to take place beyond the linear constraints of simply writing with words.

Prior to our creative intervention, the class teacher had asked pupils to produce a piece of writing about their Christmas holiday. 50% of the submissions fell short of the word count specified by the Scottish Criterion Scale for P5 pupils. At the

end of our project, the class teacher asked pupils to write about their Easter holiday.

The class teacher told us:

*“Across the board, there’s more improvement than I expected. Some of them have made huge improvements... this one [early writing] is about 80 words. Now we’re getting [post project writing] over 250 words. I think she feels a lot freer with her writing. Lots more ideas... telling the reader more about things... She’s now working at P6 level, where she had been at P3.”*



The teacher commented specifically on four boys who had consistently not been attaining due to their inability to transfer thoughts into writing, and therefore falling short of the required word count. After our intervention, all four boys' writing exceeded the word count and demonstrated improved application of punctuation and descriptive words. Most pleasing for the teacher was the effective use of paragraphs by two of these boys. 'Paragraphs' had been introduced before the project but wasn't an area the teacher had specifically worked on during our intervention. Rather, **the boys had discovered a need for paragraphs** – and used them effectively.



## Conclusions

Over a very short period of time (20 hours) the results showed a considerable improvement in writing ability amongst the entire class.

*"I learned how to write a whole lot of things" Pupil*

On another recent Hidden Giants project we asked a group of P7s 'what makes a great story?' Their immediate response was "spelling, grammar and punctuation". These factors are indeed important, but surely perform a supporting role to **the mercurial and human practice of story-telling**. Within the Williamston project we purposely circumvented the components of writing that potentially turn pupils away from learning the craft of storytelling. If a pupil is restricted by the fear of 'getting it wrong' there is a danger of suppressing their ability to tell a story, and more importantly their own story or narrative. If education is to be truly emancipatory we must ensure learners are not confined by the 'easy to measure' components but excited by the **vastness of the world** around them and alive to the possibility of their strategic ability to help shape it.

Perhaps writing starts by not writing – it starts by thinking critically and seeing the possibilities of stories that lie everywhere.

