

# **THE PUSHKIN TRUST: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS. AN INVESTIGATION**

## **Introduction**

The Pushkin Trust, as it has been retitled since 2004 – originally The Pushkin Prizes Trust – is an educational charity founded by The Duchess of Abercorn in 1987 at Baronscourt, Co Tyrone. From the beginning, its focus has been on stimulating pupils' imaginations through, largely workshop-based, experiential learning, with the aspiration that pupils might be enabled to articulate their new and varied learning experiences through creative writing. The format of a typical Pushkin Trust educational experience could be characterised as pyramid-shaped; a series of interconnected art, dance, drama and music practical workshops, led by experienced facilitators, are followed or preceded by natural history 'workshops' or environmental explorations in the grounds of Baronscourt, and all this experiential learning culminates in a creative writing session, which is predicated on the earlier experiences. These educational events, with about sixty participating pupils circulating among different workshops, usually last for one full schoolday, though pupils also have the opportunity for week-long residential sessions during the so-called "Summer Camps of the Imagination". Teachers also participate in these workshops and are then encouraged to develop this experiential approach to education, and to creative writing particularly, when back in their classrooms. Pupils (and teachers) are also encouraged to submit their subsequent efforts at creative writing for possible publication – to date, three volumes (1990, 1996, 1999) of writing by children have appeared, as has one (2001) by teachers (all three published by The Pushkin Trust).

As articulated in a recent Mission Statement (2002), the intention of the Pushkin Trust is “to release the creativity and imagination of the children of Ireland by providing them with opportunities to communicate their thoughts, feelings and expressions”. From the beginning also, however, the Pushkin Trust advocated an ideal of educational inclusion; to quote again from its Mission Statement, its hope was “to unite children and adults in the common bond of creativity which transcends all the factors that might divide them”. In the context of Northern Ireland, of course, the obvious divisions within the education system, mirroring to some extent those within society at large, hardly need to be rehearsed. In its own way, the Pushkin Trust has helped to bridge and even transcend that divide by bringing pupils from both main communities together with the common aim of creative writing through experiential education. From the start, too, there was an element of cross-border collaboration because of participation by some schools in the Republic; more recently, some schools from Russia have also been involved. However, that ideal of inclusion has not just, in however small a way, helped to narrow the sectarian divide within Northern Ireland, or the division between the North of Ireland and the Republic. It has also helped to further and develop the process of integration of those children within the mainstream of education and children with a variety of special educational needs (SEN). Against that background of integration, the main purpose of this paper – using replies to a questionnaire sent in May 2003 to a representative sample of participating primary teachers, as part of the basis for my analysis – is to investigate the benefits for children with SEN of participation in the Pushkin Trust’s brand of experiential education.

## **Children with SEN and the questionnaire**

It might be helpful to clarify at this point what, for the purposes of this article, is meant by children with SEN. Evans and Lunt (2005, p.48) suggest the varieties and complexities which adhere to the phrase. Pupils, thus defined, include those with “physical difficulties, sensory difficulties, speech and language difficulties, moderate or general learning difficulties, autistic spectrum disorders, specific learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties and profound and multiple difficulties”. The children mainly referred to in this investigation, however, are those with “moderate or general learning difficulties” and “autistic spectrum disorders”, as these were the categories of children referred to by teachers in their responses to the questionnaire. It also needs to be pointed out that this study is comparatively small-scale and impressionistic, rather than scientific or quantitative in nature; nevertheless, some very interesting results emerged. However, before providing details of my methodology, and presenting and evaluating the teachers’ replies to the questionnaire, it would be helpful to situate this investigation within the context both of Howard Gardner’s theories about multiple intelligences and the work of Kolb and others focused on different styles of learning.

## **Multiple intelligences and The Pushkin Trust’s experiential education**

Gardner’s theories certainly provide a fascinating educational context for this investigation. As is well known, he first presented his theory of multiple intelligences when he identified seven different kinds of intelligences in his book, published in 1983, entitled: *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. His seven key intelligences were: logico-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal. In a more recent book, however,

*Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Gardner considered the possibility of what he (1999, p.4) referred to as “new candidate intelligences, including naturalist, spiritual, existential and moral ones”. In thus tentatively expanding his virtual list, Gardner implicitly acknowledged one of the problems associated with his theory, a problem which has been accurately pinpointed in Joan Hanafin’s book, *Towards New Understandings: Assessment and the Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. She argues (1997, p.17): “Another limitation of the Multiple Intelligences theory is that it is a ‘systems theory’. This means that Gardner has borrowed various elements of other models on intelligence ...” She goes on to quote Sternberg (1990, p.261) who claims, “The disadvantage of this type of theory is that it is difficult to falsify as it has no definite parameters as a framework, that is, it can expand at will”. John White is even more stringent in his reservations. He argues (1998, p.19): “The overall verdict on M1 theory must be that it is seriously deficient as an account of intelligence. It seems to rest at root on the insecurest of foundations, dependant on subjective judgements on Gardner’s part. It takes the shape it does partly because it is based on two further theories, Piagetian-style developmentalism and a Goodman-style theory of symbolism, both of themselves resting on shaky foundations”. Nevertheless, despite these caveats, it remains the case that Gardner’s theories, particularly as he has refined and developed them in *Intelligence Reframed*, open up the educational possibilities for children with SEN in a very helpful and stimulating way.

One of his key ideas, which certainly has relevance for this paper, is his concern about the psychometric tradition of intelligence testing and its retrograde consequences for both teaching and learning. The idea of testing is certainly alien to the Pushkin Trust’s belief in “the ‘spark’ that lay dormant in many children, often

thought not to be ‘making the grade’” (The Duchess of Abercorn, 2003, p.2). Gardner’s focus on what might be termed differentiated intelligence, as it is present in certain individuals, is also important. He refers (1999, p.39) to “people who, without any documented signs of brain injury, have unusual profiles of intelligence. One example is the savant, who exhibits an area of stunning strength along with ordinary abilities or even marked deficits. Autistic people are an even clearer example, since many autistic children are outstanding at numerical calculation, musical performance or reproduction of melodies, or drawing”. Also fascinating, and also relevant for this paper, is Gardner’s focus on the cultural context in which intelligences can be manifested. He argues (1999, p.34) that an intelligence “can be conceptualised as a biophysical potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture”. The Pushkin Trust’s emphasis on providing experiential stimuli which enhance the ability of all children (irrespective of their positioning on a psychometric scale) to articulate their ideas and emotions through creative writing certainly chimes harmoniously with this definition of intelligence.

Elsewhere, in *Intelligence Reframed*, Gardner argues the case for a recognition and acceptance of difference, but also the need to cater for difference by providing an educational context which is not standardised or uniform. He observes (1999, p.91): “We are not all the same; we do not all have the same kinds of minds; and education works most effectively if these differences are taken into account rather than denied or ignored ... At the practical level, it suggests that any uniform educational approach is likely to serve only a small percentage of children optimally”. In taking pupils (albeit, temporarily) out of the conventional classroom, and in fostering this creativity

through a variety of experiential stimuli, the Pushkin Trust is implicitly subverting a standardised approach to education, and opening up opportunities especially for those children for whom, for a variety of reasons, more standardised education can be problematic. Other elements within the Pushkin Trust's strategy which are particularly significant for children with SEN include the valuing of process as well as product (the abandonment, in recent years, of prizes for the "best" creative writing, and the substitution, instead, of a ceremony which celebrates all children's writing efforts, have reinforced this) and the fostering of parental involvement by encouraging parents also to participate in the "Summer Camps of the Imagination" at Baronscourt. Both these ideas find or echo in Gardner's comments (1999, p.91) on his preferred type of school.

I would happily send my children to a school that takes differences among children seriously, that shares knowledge about differences with children and parents, that encourages children to assume responsibility for their own learning, and that presents materials in such a way that each child has the maximum opportunity to master those materials and to show others and themselves what they have learned and understood.

In thus fostering a methodology which implicitly acknowledges some of the educational and psychological insights provided by Gardner, the work of the Pushkin Trust, especially as it impacts on children with SEN, can be seen to be situated within a significant educational and psychological context. Certainly, too, the sheer range of learning experiences provided by the Pushkin Trust can be seen as very germane to many of the intelligences identified by Gardner. Thus, the focus on language, through creative writing, connects very obviously with Gardner's concept of linguistic intelligence. In the creative writing sessions at Baronscourt, and later back in their own classrooms, children are encouraged to use language creatively and

expressively, to play with words, to use similes and metaphors. Spatial intelligence includes the ability to observe and discriminate closely, to express thoughts and feelings through drawing pictures; in Pushkin Trust workshops, children are encouraged to respond to their experiences through art-work, and to engage in moments of quiet reflection in order to free the imaginative processes. In the guided explorations of the grounds at Baronscourt, they are encouraged to examine the natural environment closely, to discriminate between types of flora and fauna, thereby developing their naturalist intelligence. Bodily–Kinaesthetic intelligence is developed through engagement in role-play and creative drama. Musical intelligence is cultivated through the inclusion of workshops focused on enjoying experimentation with sound, composing songs, playing instruments, and expressing thoughts, feelings and emotions in musical form. Similarly, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences are fostered because, as well as being encouraged to understand their inner selves, their own thoughts and emotions, the various workshops encourage children to work as members of a group and to listen to and empathise with their peers.

### **Experiential learning, learning styles and children with SEN**

As well as situating this investigation of the Pushkin Trust and children with SEN within the context of Gardner’s theories about multiple intelligence, it is helpful also to contextualise it with reference to the work of Kolb, and others, on experiential learning and varieties of learning styles. In his book, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Kolb claimed (1984, p.41) that “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience”. In pursuit of

that transformation, Kolb outlined a typology of different learning styles (diverger, assimilator, converger, accommodator) and a particular sequence of (cyclical) processes (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation). It could be argued that Kolb's theories, and also, as Fielding (1996, p.83) points out, "the learning modality strengths approach (auditory, visual and kinaesthetic) associated with the work of Walter Barbe and Raymond Swassing" provide complementary pedagogical support to Gardner's concepts of multiple intelligences. It is certainly the case that the Pushkin Trust's comprehensive approach to experiential education greatly facilitates different learning styles and enables participating pupils to move through the various stages of learning, as outlined by Kolb. The structure of the workshops and the environmental activities also encourage much group interaction, thus enabling pupils to benefit from fellow pupils' strengths, and maximising the advantages of different learning styles.

Other educationalists have similarly underlined the need to accommodate different styles of learning. Addressing teachers of children with SEN, specifically, Camiletti argues (1996, p.42) that they ignore different learning styles at their peril: "... attainments might be transformed if other modes of learning are more routinely allowed, indeed positively encouraged and valued". Some Irish educationalists have also addressed the importance of accommodating varieties of learning styles. In a fascinating article, Hanafin, Shevlin and Flynn (2002, pp. 409-410) have argued that "pupil diversity in learning must be welcomed through a range of pedagogical approaches, curricular initiatives and the creation of a supportive classroom environment". They also argue, however, that creative diversity both in styles of teaching and modes of learning is more normal in special education, and its methods and objectives could be profitably extrapolated into mainstream schooling.

Specifically, they propose (2002, p.409) “that insights from a combination of the theory of multiple intelligences and special education perspectives can reformulate mainstream education to begin to respond effectively to the diverse needs of all learners”. Through the on-going development of its brand of experiential education, the Pushkin Trust endorses a diverse range of both teaching and learning styles and, simultaneously, it creatively transcends perceived differences between mainstream children and those with SEN.

### **“Experiential” creative writing: the “English” tradition**

It can also be pointed out, of course, that in adapting a holistic and experiential approach to creative writing specifically, the Pushkin Trust has a respectable literary pedigree within the tradition established by innovative and inspirational teachers of English. One thinks, for example, of some of the ideas articulated in Holbrook’s *English for the Rejected*, (1964) in Margaret Peel’s *Seeing to the Heart* (1967), and, more seminally, Margaret Langdon’s advocacy of what she called “intensive writing” in her book, *Let the Children Write* (1961). As C. W. Whitewell said in her Introduction (pp. v-vi) to Langdon’s book:

Mrs Langdon’s starting point is the child as he is now with the needs, interests and abilities of his stage of development. With this new starting point comes a new emphasis on the need for expression, but the expression of a lived experience with the emotions, the imagery, and the words that are the child’s.

Seamus Heaney (2002, p.14) also, writing about the creative well of his own imagination, articulates sentiments which resonate with the Pushkin Trust’s experiential approach to creative writing. “ ‘Digging’, in fact, was the name of the first poem I wrote when I thought my feeling had got into words ... I felt that I had let

a shaft down into real life”. Later (2002, p.19), in the same essay “Feeling into Words” he argues that, for the poet, creativity “involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate” and he stresses “that dynamic alertness that mediates between the origins of feeling in memory and experience”. Heaney’s valorising of the individual voice and his articulation of the holistic nature of creative inspiration should certainly offer support to the Pushkin Trust’s educational methods. The poet’s exceptional creative achievements should not overshadow the ideal exposed by the Pushkin Trust – the kingdom of poetry (or, at any rate, creative expression) should be, in a sense, open to all. Truth to one’s own experience, and the willingness to struggle with ways of articulating it, are the only criteria necessary for entry. That being the case, all children, and in some ways especially children with SEN, are invited to enter that kingdom. The following presentation, and the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire, facilitate more focused assessment of the Pushkin Trust’s achievement in enabling children with SEN to open the gates.

### **Methods: Questionnaire**

A total of fifty questionnaires, and accompanying explanatory letters, were sent to a representative sample of fifty primary schools, and a fifty-eight per cent response was obtained. The schools surveyed were in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The representative sample contained schools which were single sex and co-educational, voluntary and controlled, and special schools. The questionnaires contained four sections – factual information, perspectives, the writing process and learning styles – and twenty-five questions. The questions ranged over topics such as: the length of time during which the teacher had been involved with The Pushkin

Trust; the impact on her classroom teaching of her involvement with The Pushkin Trust; the various kinds of writing actively fostered by the teacher and the different learning styles deployed. Most specifically, however, in answering the questionnaire those teachers who had participated in the work of the Pushkin Trust on behalf of their schools were given the opportunity to consider especially the benefits of involvement for SEN children.

### **Teachers' claims**

Many teachers observed that involvement with the Pushkin Trust had helped to give a voice to pupil of all abilities, including SEN pupils, who might otherwise have remained silent. Additionally, teachers appreciated the fact that the creative work advocated by the Pushkin Trust encourages 'fun' and they emphasised the way in which "process" can be just as important as "product". Involvement with the Pushkin Trust clearly confirmed the impression of many teachers that children with SEN, who are often perceived as weak in terms of standardised criteria of educational results, are often more creative than their more "average" counterparts. Indeed, the Pushkin Trust's focus on creativity is particularly suitable for children with SEN for, as one teacher memorably expressed it:

We all see the world in roughly similar ways; they, by necessity, see it their own way, filtered through their individualistic processing. To provide them with a means of expressing their creativity is like tapping into a well-spring.

In a similar vein, it was argued that the way in which the Pushkin Trust departs from the conventional curriculum, and indeed even challenges or subverts it, makes it particularly valuable for children who have difficulty learning within the standardised format. Another respondent emphasised that the creative freedom bestowed by the

Pushkin Trust is particularly valuable for children with SEN. “They don’t have to ‘do it this way’ which is what society screams at them most of the time”. Working with the Pushkin Trust, another teacher suggested, had drawn her attention to the powers of imagination possessed by many children with SEN.

I feel a bit ashamed that I had overlooked the value of their imaginative capacity when assessing them – a bit like shutting down one of the few parts of them which functioned in as agile a manner as any of their peers.

Many respondents to the questionnaire, as well as underlining the role of the Pushkin Trust in fostering creativity and imagination in children with SEN, also emphasised other curricular benefits which had accrued as a corollary to their involvement. It was suggested, for example, that the Pushkin Trust’s focus on the environment is obviously valuable in a world increasingly concerned with ecological preservation, but it also chimes well with some children’s feeling for the physical environment and for tactile, rather than cerebral, experience. This environmentally friendly focus, as some teachers pointed out, has a particular resonance for children with SEN from a farming background. Such children are encouraged to activate, and have confirmed, experiences which they have known intimately, and which have been an integral part of their felt experience. Other respondents emphasised that the commitment of The Pushkin Trust to the value of the written word can pay dividends in terms of improving children’s secretarial skills in written English. It was observed:

Pushkin encourages teachers and pupils to look at things in more detail. And while the first draft of a piece of writing can focus on creativity, in the redrafting, pupils and teacher can focus on secretarial aspects.

The Pushkin Trust's experiential and holistic model of education was perceived as being useful in fostering creativity across the curriculum – areas such as music, art, drama and natural history are seen to be brought together in a creative fusion.

Quite a few respondents praised the value of the Pushkin Trust's experiential approach as it impinged, specifically, on children with Asberger's syndrome.

These children find it difficult to step outside the word and write from imagination. They respond best to something they have experienced; they have difficulty in social expression of emotions and, consequently, understanding how others might be feeling.

Another wrote revealingly:

One of the most moving experiences I have ever had was with a child who was actually diagnosed as having Asberger's, but who had, I discovered, the most perfect pitch I have ever noted. His capacity to express himself through music was truly humbling.

À propos of that, another teacher memorably observed: "remember that some of the great composers were deaf – today they would be classified as having SEN".

### **Summary of findings**

There are three main findings to be drawn from an analysis of responses to the questionnaire. The first is that those teachers who are actively involved with the educational initiatives fostered by the Pushkin Trust are passionately committed to its methods and philosophy, and to its implicit acknowledgement of Gardner's theories about multiple intelligences. Secondly, they believe firmly in the educational benefits accruing from it, and from its advocacy of different learning styles, for all their pupils but, most especially, for those children with SEN. Some of the most significant

responses to the questionnaire communicate that surprised joy experienced by teachers who had discovered unforeseen talents or abilities in their pupils with SEN. The third finding is the importance which teachers believe ought to be attributed to the holistic, experiential work of the Pushkin Trust and, by extension, to similar methodologies in their own classrooms, especially as many find themselves to be operating in an educational climate which has become increasingly dependent on psychometric testing.

## **Conclusion**

In putting creativity generally, and creative writing, specifically, at the heart of its educational efforts, the Pushkin Trust has the support of successful creative artists, such as Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, both of whom are Patrons of the Trust. Its work would also, I believe, be endorsed by Phillip Pullman, the author of the trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, and other successful children's books. In an article edited by Nick Pyke for *The Times Educational Supplement* (9 May, 2003) Pullman, a former teacher, vented his anger at the increased mechanisation of English teaching because of "a government-imposed curriculum". He lamented, especially, the disastrous consequences for pupils.

The danger of tests and league tables is that they demand clear, unequivocal, one-dimensional results. As a result, the children who are supposed to be at the heart of the educational process are turned into little twitching cells of response, like the nerve in the leg of Galvani's frog.

In the same article, Andrew Motion, the Poet Laureate, complains that "there isn't enough time in the national curriculum to allow the development of pupils' imagination, and not enough time for the teachers to work on that if they wanted to".

The children in Ireland and Russia, however (especially, perhaps, those with SEN) who have experienced the work of The Pushkin Trust have certainly been provided with the opportunity to develop their imagination and creativity. It is to be hoped that they may learn to respond from the fullness of their individual and highly personal intelligences, and that their creative potential will flourish, so that, in our classrooms, we may really, as Gardner (1999, p.89) observed, “Let a hundred flowers bloom”.

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