

How festivals can transform lives

Ali Mawle

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Are literary festivals just for the middle classes? They can be a whole lot more, as Cheltenham is demonstrating, writes Ali Mawle



There is something extraordinary about a young person standing on stage as a published author alongside Juno Dawson or Anthony Anaxagorou, especially when that person was in an anxiety-induced coma two years earlier. This is Jack's story. The Cheltenham Literature Festival provides a goal to aim for and an empowering opportunity to be heard; our role is to ensure that Jack and others like him have a place alongside the likes of Sebastian Faulks and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

My team and I run the year-round schools and community outreach programme for the festivals that make up Cheltenham Festivals: Jazz, Science, Music and Literature. We engage 25,000 young people a year - many through festival visits but a significant proportion through long-term, year-round creative projects. We are driven by the belief that culture should be available to everyone. This belief determines where and how we focus our resources.

In the first instance, we have made relationships with every local school that serves a low income community or that is rurally isolated. We meet leadership teams to understand the school's priorities and how the festivals can support them. Building these relationships takes time: we put great store in working closely with teachers, consulting them at every stage of the planning process so that the programme we curate is exciting and relevant. It pays off in spades: this year 38 of our target 53 schools are experiencing the festival or taking part in one of our free, year-round outreach programmes.

At first glance, the festival brings the leading writers of the day to a wealthy, educated public for 10 days in October. What fewer people see are the quiet transformations happening in young people's lives through year-round outreach. We've seen dramatic examples of the metamorphosing power of writing on local teenagers unable to attend school due to severe mental or physical illness. They use words like life-changing and a life-saver to describe our creative writing programme, Beyond Words. "It has helped me break through



a barrier of anxiety and depression and all the illnesses that I had, and I feel like I'm finally Louis again," said one participant; another parent simply stated: "I have finally got my daughter back."

Inclusion is hard to do well. Through partnership with Gloucestershire Hospital Education Service, we are finding a way of making lasting change to young people by helping them to find their voices and to be heard at a particularly challenging time of their lives.

The other outreach programme that is making strides in democratising the Literature Festival and in getting recent books into the hands of children in low income communities is Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils. Now in its third year, the programme was described recently as "spreading like a healthy virus" to 75 primary schools.

Inspired children need inspiring teachers; inspiring teachers need to be regularly inspired themselves. RTRP does just this, providing the time and space for teachers to talk about the latest books and to share ideas for using them in the classroom. One teacher spoke for many when he wrote: "The classroom is now alive with literature and inundated with books that the children have purchased for themselves based on our new shared love of reading. "

The support for the programme from writers has been immense. Many have sent personal messages to the teachers for them to share with their children; many have also engaged via social media. "I'm so glad it exists: I hope it spreads like wildfire," Katharine Rundell tweeted recently.

The link with the literature festival means that we can bring the thousands of participating children face-to-face with their new heroes, bringing everything full circle. Writers such as Emma Carroll and Piers Torday have been vocal about the extraordinary level of excitement about reading that the project has generated. So much so that we are in discussion with organisations elsewhere in the UK about setting up regional RTRP hubs.

We have had great support from publishers too - offering us generous discounts on books and enabling their authors to come to events - for which we are massively grateful.

The vast majority of literature festivals are reliant on the ticket-buying public for their core audience. It is precisely this group which enable us to leverage opportunities for the wider public. We say long may the middle classes remain loyal.

<https://www.cheltenhamfestivals.com/education/take-part/>

Ali Mawle is director of education at Cheltenham Festivals. The Cheltenham Literature Festival runs until 14 October.

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