

FINAL REPORT

Dr Sue Dymoke, Associate Professor, Institute of Education, Nottingham Trent University

sue.dymoke@ntu.ac.uk

Introduction

This evaluation provides an overview of aspects of the First Story Student/Young Ambassadors scheme and its implementation in a small group of schools in 2020-21 and 2021-22. It draws on data collected in both stages of the evaluation and, where appropriate, compares and contrasts the findings to arrive at a set of conclusions.

The report draws on data collected from interviews with First Story leads working four schools in each year of the evaluation. It also draws on the perceptions of Young Ambassadors from three FS schools, who attended a series of online leadership training sessions during the Summer term 2021 and one group of three students from one school who participated in some aspects of the modules on publishing and mentoring offered to Young Ambassadors in 2021-22.

It is important to acknowledge the extremely challenging contexts in which First Story schools have been operating during the two years of the evaluation period. It is very evident that all learning and enrichment opportunities in the schools represented in this sample were severely impacted, firstly by Covid-19 in 2020-21, which resulted in a switch to online teaching and use of student hubs, and secondly by increased pressures on schools in 2021-22. During the second year they began to resume whole class teaching and to cope with the additional and ongoing challenges they now faced in the light of the Covid pandemic. These include a dramatic rise in student mental health and well-being issues, changes to GCSE assessment requirements and the return of formal examination timetables, increased staffing absences due to Covid and pressures to return to whole class teaching.

Nevertheless, the final evaluation demonstrates that the Young Ambassadors (hereafter YAs) scheme has resulted in a number of positive outcomes albeit in highly constrained circumstances. I hope that the findings and conclusions in this report will inform future First Story planning of the implementation of YA training modules and other developments in First Story schools.

Methodology

Qualitative data collection methods were used.

In 2020-21:

- 10 minute introductory focus group discussion (recorded online) with a group of YAs. Students were given a number of discussion headings and invited to share their reflections (see Appendix 1).
- Diamond ranking activity (recorded online) with a group of YAs. Students asked to work as a school group to read, choose and rank their top nine statements in order from a selection of 13 (9 statements and 4 blanks on which they could write their own – see Appendix 2). Each statement had to complete the phrase 'In our role as student ambassadors at [name of] school we are...' The groups chose one student from their school to report back on their rankings.
- Graphical Elicitation activity (recorded online) with a group of YAs. Students asked to work individually to draw two quick sketches. Sketch one should show what creative writing meant to them personally in 2021. Sketch two should show what they thought creative writing might mean to them personally once they had left school. The students could add a thought bubble of caption to each statement if they wished. They were also advised to ensure that should feel

comfortable about sharing the sketch with others so not to share anything that was private or too personal. In sharing the drawings on screen each student was invited to try to explain what they had drawn. NB students from School C completed this activity as a pair at a later date.

- Semi-structured (recorded) online one-to-one interviews 20 -30 mins in length with four FS Leads in schools using nine areas of focus previously agreed with the FS Head of Programmes.

In 2021-22:

- 10 minute introductory focus group discussion with a group of YAs (discussion points as above). However, due to technical problems at the school end, this discussion was led offline by a FS teacher who summarised the students' brief responses and posted them to me.
- Diamond ranking activity (as above but with 12 statements* and two blanks) with one school group of three YAs (the fourth was absent). This activity had to be completed offline as the school had severe problems with their access to TEAMS. As a result of this I could not listen in on the conversation. I was sent their final diamond ranking by post and was unable to engage in discussion with them. **The additional statements were about being informed about publication processes and being more recognised in their communities as writers. These were added to reflect the new YA training modules.*
- Graphical Elicitation activity with a group of YAs (as above). Again this activity was completed offline (but the day after the planned data collection) by two of the four YAs. The results were posted to me. This meant I could not engage in discussion with the students about their drawings.
- Semi-structured (recorded) online one-to-one interviews 20 -30 mins in length with four FS Leads and one additional supporting teacher in four schools using ten areas of focus previously agreed with Bethan Goddard, Head of Programmes at First Story (refer to question headings below in section b).

Ethical clearance for conducting the evaluation was given by the NTU Research Ethics Committee. Participant information sheets and consent forms were issued to the schools and to FS Leads by First Story in mid-June 2021. In 2021 and 2022, completed, signed parental and student consent forms were returned either in hard copy or on screen. All FS Leads interviewed gave signed consent.

Data has been analysed thematically and is reported in turn by data collection activity.

Sample

Young Ambassadors: the sample schools were selected by First Story. In year one of the evaluation a group of six YAs from three FS schools participated in a 45 minute online data collection session on 1/7/21.

- School A: Three YAs.
- School B: One YA.
- School C: Two YAs.

In the second year the sample schools were again selected by First Story. Three YAs from School D participated in aspects of data collection (as detailed above) but offline.

FS Leads in schools: In year one of the evaluation, invitations to participate were sent out to seven staff members in six different school settings which included the same set of schools as in the interim evaluation. The staff members were selected and invited by First Story. Four staff members from four different FS settings were able to participate and were interviewed separately online in July 2021.

In year two, invitations were sent out to eight staff members in the same six different school settings. The staff members were selected and invited by First Story. Five staff members from four different FS settings were able to participate and were interviewed. Three were interviewed

separately and two staff members from the same school were interviewed together. All interviews took place online in June and July 2022.

Findings

a. **Feedback from Young Ambassadors (data collected 1/7/21 and 12-18/7/22):**

Focus group discussion year one: The group discussion served to provide a very brief introduction to the students, their particular interests in the role and how it was beginning to develop in their school. I sensed that the discussion perhaps overlapped too much with what they had been talking about in the first part of the session and they were keen to move on to something different. Nevertheless, their enthusiasm for the programme shone through their responses and there was a strong indication that there were high hopes for how the programme would develop in 2021-2022.

School A students conveyed a strong sense of the organisational, communication and leadership skills they were developing. They talked of the nerves experienced before events took place and the enjoyment derived from successful events which included Year 9 National Writing Day workshops on Non Fiction, Film, Flash Fiction and a Poetry Slam. The School B SA conveyed a keen sense of the different options that were open to young people through writing and through her own involvement as an SA. She wanted to enable others to plan and to figure out the choices they could make.

In terms of changes or additions that they would like to make to the programme, there was a desire for a wider range of year groups to be involved in School A and perhaps to run two distinct groups to give more students the opportunity to be involved. School C were planning a launch event for September 2021. They commented that they would like more interactive “on our feet” activities in some of the writing group sessions and greater incentives for writing in the form of more competitions.

Focus group discussion year two: The group discussion was much more limited in scope due to the fact that YAs from just one of the six invited schools (School D) were able to participate. This meant that there could be no direct comparison or follow up with the three schools who had participated last year. Additionally, technological failures meant that the discussion was conducted offline by a FS teacher rather than the external evaluator who would have perhaps been able to challenge them differently about their responses. The teacher elicited views from three of the four YAs and summarised these in one document. I am very grateful to them all for making time to do this and for the school staff support in carrying out the other data collection activities offline at such a hectic time in the term.

School D students’ motivations for the roles they had taken on were varied. One had initially been reluctant to become an Ambassador but then thought she should do it “because I was asked”. This was in contrast to the other two students. One stated “I thought the benefits that were shown to me [were] a good thing to have on a CV, [to] help me get on the college/university course that I want.” The third student expressed her previous enjoyment of First Story and a desire to “continue being a part of it.”

None of the three YAs felt they had been very prepared to take on their new roles and this led them to identify one of the major changes that they would like to see to the programme in 2022-23, namely that the programme should prepare new ambassadors for their roles “and what is expected of them”. They also stressed the idea that ambassadors should be prepared and enabled to “run more sessions to get the youthful mindset – to know what

young people want.” This implies that they want much more of a say in the focus and content of the FS workshops themselves, alongside other FS school events, and to have opportunities to use their knowledge of their peers’ needs.

Although they did not feel prepared they were able to participate in a number of activities including: FS workshops; reading their work on a local radio station; attending the writing day at Cambridge University during which one of them had interviewed a writer and all had been able to share their work with others.

None of them directly mentioned the publishing or mentoring modules that they had participated in but they had all been involved in creating and editing of a zine on theme of mental health issues for young people, This was completed late in the summer term and includes new writing and a competition winner’s poem alongside work previously published in several of the school’s FS anthologies. One student noted that she “enjoyed having control and developing the zine”. The group wanted to ensure that future ambassadors had “more of a say” in editing work that went into the annual FS anthology as well as opportunities to work together much more to “create a zine independently of the anthology”. It is clear from this that their editorial experience has developed during the year and they would like more of chances to develop their expertise in this area in the future.

The impact of the YA roles on their own writing appears to have been significant. All wanted to keep writing. One student stated a desire to write in a wider range of genres including poetry, songs, scripts and stories. Another stated that her role had enabled her to think more about her career choice as she had decided that she wanted to be a history teacher. This idea is also explored in her response to the graphical elicitation activity (see below).

Diamond ranking activity year one: one student from each school reported back on their rankings. (I was not party to their deliberations prior to this in their groups.) There were some challenges to this activity as, due to Covid restrictions, the YA roles have not yet developed as fully as envisaged this year so it is likely that they have less evidence to support their statement rankings. Nevertheless, the schools representatives all reflected to some extent on what they had been able to achieve and how their experiences had influenced their ordering/choices of statements.

All the statements were selected by at least one school. Key statements related to some of the rankings chosen are as follows:

By School A: Ranking 1 was d: ‘encouraging other people to enjoy writing’ which was described as ‘a big aim of ours’. The group viewed statements c: ‘supporting other students to express their ideas’ and b: ‘making a contribution to our school’ as similar to d and ranked these as 2 and 3. Their spokesperson talked about the “buzz” after an event they had organised.

By School B: Ranking 1 was a: ‘becoming more confident’ – a statement that was chosen by all three schools within rankings 1 - 5. The YA’s comments on each ranking were very thoughtfully supported with examples i.e. in discussing Ranking 6 (h: ‘learning to co-operate with other people’) she noted that she “didn’t usually hang out with” her fellow YA. With ranking 8 g: ‘developing our organisations skills’ she commented that she was gradually stopping ‘getting stressed’ about organisation. These comments imply that the YA role and the training are helping her to develop strategies which could impact on her development in many significant ways.

By School C: Ranking 1 was g: ‘developing our own organisational skills’ was chosen by School C because they said they felt ‘pretty on top of it’ and the role was ‘taking them out of their shell’. For Ranking 2 the same students had tweaked statement e: ‘learning about the challenges of being a writer’ so that it stated “learning about the challenges of being a leader”. This is a very thoughtful rewriting as it closely reflects the nature of the training that they have received. I may well want to use this statement in future iterations of this data collection method. The students also reflected on how they had co-operated with heads of year.

There was very little similarity between the 1- 9 rankings arrived at by each school. Two schools ranked statement i: ‘helping to make our school a more creative place’ in 6th place.

All 3 schools devised at least one of their own statements to include in the 9. One student from School B carried out this group activity on her own. She had no one to discuss with or defend her choices: other students could well have influenced the rankings and/or phrasings arrived at.

The YA’s own statement phrasings are particularly interesting:

- School A: “Time Management” (ranked 1st)
- School B: “Making it accessible for all”(ranked 2nd); “Helps to respect the people who usually plan these events” (ranked 5th); “Helps us to figure out people’s writing skills and weaknesses in writing” (ranked 9th).
- School C: “Professional” (ranked 9th) and statement e rephrased – see above.

Their own statements seem to indicate a developing awareness of the responsibilities that their role entails. Time management is a key skill for both student and professional life. School B’s statements demonstrate awareness of inclusion and support agendas which would both be vital within a creative writing group. In commenting on inclusivity, the YA noted that increased accessibility should be provided ‘no matter what’ was being written. The YA from School B additionally recognises the role of the FS lead and perhaps hints that planning such writing events is more demanding than it might appear. Her choice of words arguably echo statement f (‘now more respected in school’). School C’s use of the phrase “Professional” is a broader statement which perhaps captures some of the specific comments added by the other schools. In writing this statement, the young women reflected on their maturity in that they had been learning about “acting professionally” when something they had organised did not go to plan. This is surely a key skill for all leaders to develop.

Diamond ranking activity year two: this was completed by three YAs from School D. The a) statement “Becoming confident” was their first choice, in line with year one findings above. Second place was shared by b) “Making a contribution to our school community” and h) “learning to co-operate with other people”. The third tier included a statement devised by the group: “developing an independent project”, which clearly links with issues raised in the focus group discussion above, along with i) “helping to make our school a more creative place” and j) being “more informed about publication processes”. The latter statement reflects the potential impact of the publishing module and also their editorial experiences of creating the zine. The fourth tier of comments link specifically to their own and other young people’s writing: e) “learning about the challenges of being a writer” and c) “supporting other students to express their ideas”. Their ninth and final choice was another of their own statements: “brought a youthful mindset to student input”. This comment links with the

group's previously stated desire to have more of a direct involvement in the focus and content of FS workshops and other events so that these are perhaps more relevant to their peers' experiences and creative/other needs.

Graphical Elicitation activity year one: four students (from Schools A and B) participated in this activity during the online session. Students from School C chose to complete it as a paired activity at a later date and no discussion about images took place. It is difficult to comment fully on their contribution.

Sketch one what creative writing meant personally to SAs in 2021:

Two students YA1 and YA2 focused specifically on themselves, placing a sole image of themselves at the centre of both their drawings and perceiving their writing as currently being concerned with relaxation and escape. Both talked of, and drew, dreaming – in terms of collecting ideas together. In the case of YA1, she presents herself in a world bursting with ideas, “a head full of stories” that will transform themselves onto numerous pages of writing. YA2 portrays herself as not focusing on school or thinking about Maths but wanting to be at home writing.

YA3 also talked about and drew dreaming in bed, “dreaming without care” and collecting ideas or thoughts “about the day's events”. Interestingly, she did not view this as an entirely solitary experience as, in both her drawings, she presented herself as sharing, talking “to anyone who will listen about writing and about writing progress”. She talked about sharing her “passion” and “enjoyment” and wanting to keep talking about her writing throughout her life.

For two of these three students, YA2 and YA3, writing was an activity that appeared to happen at home.

YA4 presented a very different perspective, using the metaphor of a tree as the central image to represent her writing development over the last year. In sketch one the tree is a sapling, small, growing, protected by poles and wires, nurtured by the sun, watered and supported by gardeners (“the people who are supporting me including the FS crew” as she described them).

YA5 and YA6 drew a book with the word “Stories!!”. Their excitement of and anticipation for the programme is perhaps conveyed here.

Sketch two what they thought creative writing might mean personally to SAs once they had left school:

YA1 sees writing in the future again as an escape but this time from the world of work and an activity “outside of responsibilities” or “away from problems”. She views it as an escape into “something that can be controlled”. This seems to imply confidence about herself as a writer in the future.

YA2 presents an image of success with her writing, perhaps getting published or writing a best seller. Writing is clearly something which she sees as part of her future life.

YA3 is the student to focus most on talking, enabling and sharing in a writing community in both of her drawings. There is a coherent development in her drawings. Here she presents herself as a successful author giving a book signing but also talked about the link between both of her sketches and the need to talk about her passion, writing, and to encourage others to be creative or to write.

In sketch two YA4 drew a full blown tree with a very thick trunk and no protection. This tree produces a big bag of fruit. The gardener is still present but has acquired a hat because they are “happy”. The nurturing provided by the FS crew would appear to have reaped significant rewards in this drawing which, once more, recognises the

importance of the support received in ensuring potential long term development as a writer.

YA5 and YA6 drew a brightly coloured word “Imagination” framed with coloured squiggles and zigzag lines. This potentially shows an awareness that writing is about much more than writing stories (and that their present FS programme has perhaps felt restricted to a focus on writing stories) that the lively wide world of the imagination will be opening up to them.

Graphical Elicitation activity year two: Two drawings were received from YAs in School D. Due to technical problems there was no opportunity to discuss the drawings with the students.

Sketch one what creative writing meant personally to YAs in 2022:

Both drawings were similar in that the students drew what they thought was currently inside their brains in relation to their writing. The more detailed of the two images by YA7 indicated that time, “finding time” was a pressure. She was preoccupied with a range of different writing ideas in her drawing such a love, death, a knife next to a pool of blood, feeling scared (or perhaps writing scary stories?), sometimes [writing?] “a fluffy story” and a book. In the top left hand corner she drew a large star. This could be connected with reading books at night or perhaps the success she was aiming for through her writing. YA8 drew a small brain filled with “words”, the acronym “FT13C”, a book, a clock and a pencil. Beside the drawing she wrote “a lot going on”. From both of these drawings we can perhaps surmise that they are very actively engaged in thinking about writing and writing itself. However, trying to secure a place for writing in their busy lives appears to be a pressure for both of them.

Sketch two what they thought creative writing might mean personally to SAs once they had left school:

YA7 drew four sheets of paper with lines and writing on them. Three were labelled: “Script #1” with alternate groups of lines for different boys 1, 2 and 3 and girls 1 and 2 ; “MANUSCRIPT Chapter 1” and “Song Lyrics”. The fourth included drawings of crotchets and quavers notations and looked like a piece of music. This drawing links to the YA’s comments in the focus group discussion about wanting to write in a range of genres in the future. We can speculate that her FS experiences have given her the confidence to want to express her ideas in different forms and to see these varied writing experiences as a part of her future life beyond school.

YA8 drew an image of a history classroom filled with students at their desks, a whiteboard with the words the Ambassador’s name on it and the words “History” and “Holocaust”. A female teacher stands at the front of the class and, in a speech bubble says “lets write a diary entre”. This is clearly a projection of the YA’s future career plans which were also articulated in the focus group discussion. She is asking her students to write in the particular format of a diary entry, a text type that is used in English and Humanities teaching to enable students to express their responses to events or a particular issue from a certain perspective. The YA could be making a direct link here to the different types of writing that she may well have experienced in FS workshops. The speech bubble also indicates that she believes creative writing has a place in the curriculum beyond English lessons.

Overall the use of graphic elicitation has provided useful insights in to the YAs’ views of their current and projected future writing experiences.

b. **Feedback from FS Leads in schools (interviewed during July 2021 and June- July 2022):** The four FS leads interviewed were each asked 9 questions about their school's involvement with First Story in 2020-21. In 2022 five FS teachers were interviewed and an additional question was asked, at the request of First Story (see Question 10 below). This explored school capacity to support the YAs and how the structure of the school year affects this. Three of the five FS leads, who are either teachers, reading leads or librarians, had also been interviewed in the first set of interviews which meant that it was possible to follow-up on areas previously discussed in some cases. Key themes are outlined below and answers given in each year are compared. Some direct quotations are included to evidence some of the views expressed.

Q1 Impact of FS programme on school community: Three of the four interviewees in 2020-21 referred to increased confidence, self-belief or self-assurance amongst their FS students either in terms of their own writing or, in the case of one school, in students taking on the mentoring role. One commented "I just think it gave the people who wouldn't normally have a voice." The fourth FS lead felt it had had "quite a positive impact... The students who have been engaged in it, do talk about it a lot. The English teachers do mention it quite a lot." An impact on team/group mentality and support across year groups along with the benefits of creativity for students' mental health were also referred to by two staff members.

In 2022, increased school wide or individual confidence were noted by two interviewees and reported by the FS writer that one school group had worked with.

Three FS leads felt that the impact of First Story had widened (or would widen in 2022-23) in terms of reach across their schools. In one case this was due to the FS lead's success in securing additional funding for 50 % of the group across the whole school age range. One interviewee stated that FS was now established and "a very familiar thing in the school both for staff and students". The age group of attendees at the FS workshop had expanded across Years 7 – 11 (but concentrated in Yr 9) with a core group of around 15-16 students attending weekly and 3-4 others making contributions to the anthology. FS students were said to be "vocal and proud about what they do". The second FS lead talked about the impact of offering FS competitions across the school which had resulted in 70 entries for the 6 word story competition with 40 of the entries being written by students not involved in the FS programme. She also commented that writing and creativity had become "more cross curricular". For example, all Year 8 students were now involved in design and submission of an anthology cover as a half- termly activity in their IT lessons. A winner was chosen from their submissions and all Year 8s were invited to the book launch. On-going work with the National Literacy Trust and First Story had offered links and enabled more opportunities for students to participate in festival events and other activities such as Windrush celebrations. Such events "introduced [them] to the writing community".

A further FS lead stated that the impact of the programme had not been as developed as she had wanted it to be in 2022. A number of significant changes to senior and middle leader staffing, including that of the FS story lead, meant the school needed to develop "new momentum" whilst simultaneously ensuring it had sufficient stability to move forward. In spite of these concerns the FS workshops were offered alongside an impressive suite of other English-related clubs and the FS anthologies were used widely in classrooms.

Q2 Impact of the Young Ambassador role on young people in school: This was a mixed picture in 2021 as all the schools' plans for their YAs to work with certain year groups or on specific events were affected to differing degrees by Covid-19, bubble arrangements and the

late implementation of extra end of year examinations. This placed undue pressure on some YAs who “crumbled” as a result.

One FS lead was frustrated that they could not get started and focused on the challenge of selecting the right young people to take on the role next year those with “the potential to really step up into that role and spread First Story throughout school.”

One school had YAs in 2019-20 who delivered workshops within the session, helped the First Story group to “gain more confidence within their writing. They helped them with the editing process of it as well which was really good.” In 20- 21 YAs participated in the FS mentoring training which was “absolutely fantastic”. The FS lead could see the benefits of both these sets of experiences and hoped that in 21-22 the YAs would be able to gain experience of both aspects.

One school was able to organise a whole school build-a-story event led by their YAs who provided prompts for each form group, took assemblies and participated in Zoom meetings which they enjoyed. The FS lead noted the “positive energy” that they created amongst other students. “They have stepped up to it in an amazing way and have embraced it totally. They are very mature and driven... and very focused.... they did a really super job and I was so proud of them.”

Three of the four schools in 2022 reported that YA involvement has been “more patchy” less successful than the previous year as students’ time commitments (with a reintroduction of the requirement for students to sit GCSE examinations with revised assessment specifications) had become much more pressured. The expectation that “an awful lot would run after school” was problematic and aligned to conflicts with GCSE work particularly. Attendance at workshops and events had therefore become much more of an issue in the later stages of the pandemic than the teachers interviewed in 2021 had expected. One school had provided an extra workshop session for those who could no longer attend the regular Wednesday slots but this placed extra demands on staff. The rush to prepare events for National Writing Day in June 2022 was also seen as challenging in terms of where the day is located in the school year. One school had offered a carousel of 3 x 20 minute sessions led by their YAs but the lead thought this event felt “a bit too rigid”. The fourth school had a much more positive response with many of the FS group wanting to be chosen as Young Ambassadors. Those chosen were selected for their enthusiasm and were not necessarily the best writers in the group. The team of four YAs regularly attended the workshops, supporting the writer and students in the sessions. They were also seen as ‘very forthcoming’ with sharing their own work to start off discussions. The YAs had worked with a lead teacher to develop a zine on mental health issues for young people and had encouraged submissions from beyond the FS group in order to extend awareness of this important issue and of First Story across the school.

Nine YAs in the schools that I was able to contact had completed one or both of the modules on publishing and mentoring while others had stepped back in their involvement. In one school there was no interest in the modules even though a journalist had offered to come in to support the students. One FS lead stated that they would “need to look at who, how and when we use opportunities and resources” in the future to reduce the demands on staff time.

Staff interviewed also raised the issue of who could be an YA and whether it might be more useful to appoint either Yr 9 or, in schools that had sixth forms, Yr 12 students in order to reduce the pressure on GCSE students. However, one school had already endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to recruit Yr 9s to the role in 2021-22. It was felt that Yr 12 students could

draw further on their previous FS workshop experiences in carrying out an ambassadorial role.

Q3. Impact on students as writers and students' views about writing: In 2020- 21 three FS leads were very positive about the impacts on students' energy and excitement for new writing ideas, their selections of a wider range of reading texts, their belief about themselves as writers, their progress in end of year examinations and their development as, in one school, low attaining students who were able to utilise some of the techniques they had learned and begun to "craft their work."

By contrast, one FS lead referred to impact as "a mixed bag" because some of the students are "going to go on to write for their entire lives, either as a hobby or try and make a career out of it. And some of them could not be bothered and came to the sessions because it was something to do". The same person also referred to evidence from GCSE outcomes to comment that the programme was not having a significant enough impact on Yr 9 students development of writing skills required for GCSE: "their ideas were there but their ideas were already there before the programme started. They just were developed by First Story as a programme. But unfortunately, because of the narrow side of that Language paper A section B [at GCSE], where you're literally given a chance to either write a narrative or a description and that's it basically. It's just not enough freedom for the students who went through First Story to show what they had achieved from that."

In 2022 there were, once more, some very positive responses to this question. Increase in students' confidence was again mentioned. The need for a link to the English curriculum was a key motivator for one FS lead who focused on links to the GCSE Language paper 2 through consideration of lexicon, word roots and perspective in some of the sessions She endeavoured to make these "fun sessions linking to class work and [progression] road maps'. Another school took a very different approach in focusing on the fact that although FS was referred to in English lessons, FS was "outside and [giving] a different message, freeing up about what writing can be like". This explorative approach included changing the medium of published texts (for example, from prose to poetry). Another FS lead liked the fact that students who are not part of the FS workshop want to participate in writing competitions and are "open to writing now". The school had been involved in a number of local events such as poems written on flower boxes and had been "highlighted as a school who can participate". The final lead interviewed talked about how students were being influenced by their working class writer (who came from a single parent family and who was "down to earth") to ask questions and think seriously about writing as a potential career. All these examples point to evidence of impact on young peoples' views and experiences of creative writing in both years of the evaluation.

Q4: Impact on uptake of students accessing creative-writing activities? In 2020 -21 five minute writing challenges recorded by the FS writer were shared online across KS3 and accessed by a much wider range of students than usual. The success of this was something that the FS lead wanted to build on in 21-22.

Several FS leads talked about large groups reducing to a core of 10-15 students and also the impact of lockdown on students who had had enough of online learning by the end of the school day.

One FS lead identified a potential problem of working with the same FS writer for a number of years in terms of sessions perhaps becoming too similar, the FS writer becoming too familiar a face in the academy which could have an impact on student uptake.

One FS lead talked about the difference in the groups over a number of years and was pleased with the that the take up by boys was traditionally quite high in the school. The 20-

21 group was described as a group of “quite lively, confident students” in contrast to shyer, quieter groups experienced previously.

In 2021-22 uptake, in terms of numbers and year groups represented, for the FS workshops was as follows across the four schools:

- One school had a cohort of about 20 students, mainly Yr 8s, some of whom did not all attend regularly due to clashes with other activities. They also ran a FS workshop at primary level as they are a through school.
- A second school had 22 students from across the age range but signed up but only 8-10 regular attendees. However, when there were big events or competitions the group uptake rose. The FS lead wants to learn from this and build on it in 2022-23.
- School three usually had 15—16 attendees and was expecting an increase on these numbers in 2022-23 by planning for the involvement of an extra teacher in the workshops.
- School four had approximately 20 attendees (mainly Yr 9s and Yr 11s) in a group of 25-30. The FS lead felt that the group had a “different energy” to it this year with a big core of the group coming from Year 11. The FS lead wanted to retain their interest by involving them in the scheduled September 2022 anthology launch event even though they had left the school to go on to Yr 12 elsewhere. She was very animated about retaining these students’ links with the FS group and their capacity to inspire younger students beyond their attendance at the school.

Q5. Nature of support/training provided for teachers to facilitate creative-writing

Education: In 2020-21 one FS lead drew on her own experiences as a writer but would like more training if it was offered. Another lead noted the absence of the teacher-writer meets experienced previously which had been postponed due to Covid. The need for more in-person sessions – especially one at a mid-point in the year would be appreciated.

The challenge of persuading teachers to participate in training was noted by one FS lead: “we have pushed and pushed and pushed, for the teachers to attend some training from First Story. We’ve only managed it once and it wasn’t that well attended. I think that’s lack of support from the senior leadership team. It’s just the librarian and a teaching assistant pushing it. You know, ‘Why should we do it? We’re teachers.’ We could really do with more support from our senior leadership team.”

One FS lead spoke very enthusiastically about the value of her PGC in creative writing she had completed through the Cambridge ICE as a result of a FS bursary. This meant that she was now the “department guru” whom other staff came to for creative writing advice and resources. She hoped there would be opportunities available, akin to the YA leadership programme, to support staff members to learn how “widen the scope and develop the programme or [its] impact”.

In 2021-22 one lead said that there were very limited opportunities for CPD on creative writing and those provided by First Story were “fab”. This particular teacher had participated in a previous trial of the programme so for her some of the sessions were already familiar as they had been revised. She also commented on how the FS writer in their school was not trained through FS and was drawing on his own, more personal resources. She welcomed the non-curricular nature of FS workshop sessions but felt there should be less emphasis on one-off activities and, instead,

training should be about moving on, using the FS skills to inform more focused training for young people of a longer duration.

A second lead valued the creative writing starters and suggestions provided. They had been able to access four sessions and other writer events on line including one on journalistic writing. An additional member of staff was joining the school's FS team in 2022-23 which meant that three colleagues would be involved in different ways in the following year. The new FS teacher had applied for a bursary to support her training. The transfer to GCSE had not been easy for students in their school and it had been difficult to "invigorate enthusiasm for personal writing" among this group. This issue is something that future training opportunities might want to address.

Another lead talked of the problems with being allowed out of school to attend training and how everything now had to be online. The school has CPD work every Tuesday and she would welcome a training pack for teachers that drew on FS contacts and knowledge and which could be used across the faculty during CPD time.

The fourth lead felt that the best training support was achieved by watching the writer in workshops "to see how he scaffolds the work". Attendance at the Cambridge event was also useful as it enabled her and her students to see other writers in action.

Clearly there are some training and support issues for FS to address here in order to perhaps refine the programme and make it more accessible to those who cannot leave school premises easily but also to enable more staff to engage with it.

Q6. Relationships between FS managers, senior teams and other teachers in school:

In 2020 – 2021 two FS leads referred to enthusiastic Headteachers who were keen on FS and committed to it. There was, however, a shared view from all four interviewed that they made all the arrangements and perhaps more support from senior colleagues would be welcomed to ensure greater engagement across their schools. FS leads, had to push hard to keep FS in the minds of the Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs) and across the school. These challenges had been exacerbated by Covid-19 but "pushing the teachers to come to the launch is, it's like pushing treacle uphill" and "it's just about making sure it's in everybody's consciousness all of the time"; "celebrating success is something that especially in the last year, has kind of slipped under the radar of the Covid regulations."

In 2021-22, a change of line manager in one school had resulted in members of the English department becoming "more open to FS...they can see its value". Similarly elsewhere a new acting Headteacher had shown a more positive outlook, had attended the anthology launch at Waterstone's and had signed off on funding for continued FS involvement. The CEO of the academy chain remained very supportive and that other senior colleagues had responded to his lead. Many staff attended launch events and had been invited to do so by students. Two of this year's Young Ambassadors had also been named as "star pupils" which had not only boosted their own confidence but had also raised the profile of First Story within the school. There was a strong sense that the FS lead had pushed very hard to achieve these

outcomes. She was proud that FS was “really established” and that her school was the only one in the area to have achieved this stability.

A fourth lead stated that her senior leadership team had no problems with supporting FS but the limit on the constituency of the FS group had caused some staff members to view this as a very elitist arrangement open only to students from certain postcodes. She would like more ownership of the group. She also felt that more developmental work was needed within the FS workshops to emphasise life skills which students could take with them after they had left school.

Q7. Ideas about FS programme developments in school beyond the current year:

In 2020-21 one FS lead wanted a bit more support from SLT and for staff to take up the offer of the training. Another saw the priority as targeting the uptake of the Student Ambassadors scheme, to focus on students such as those who were severely deprived and would benefit from the enrichment opportunity it offered, and celebrating First Story across the school. One FS lead felt that the FS programme was “very heavily based on the one person that you get given” and would like to have an occasional visit from a new writer in future. One FS lead wanted to use the YAs to run writing workshops lower down the school and potentially help spread the uptake of FS to Year 7 and 8. She also wanted to “push the competition aspect more” with use of both internal and external competitions and to develop use of social media further.

In 2021-22 two FS teachers described how YAs were already beginning to recruit students for the next academic year’s workshop. The FS team planned to align the Writing Day more with the school timetable. They were looking to have a new writer in 2021-22 as their current writer had completed three years in the school. They had requested a particular writer who has been through the FS programme herself and has had considerable success. It was felt she could be a very good role model for the students.

Two leads were much less certain about future developments. One of them suggested it would be useful to have a FS app for use by students which might enable the programme to become more personalised.

In line with her comments above, in response to question 6, the fourth FS lead wanted the programme to be opened up to everyone and, therefore, a lot less “exclusive”. She wanted to advertise it as widely as possible and hoped the buy-in might be the involvement of all Yr 7s.

Q8. Other suggested changes/additions to the FS programme: In 2020-2021, provision of additional writers to supplement the FS writer was mentioned by 3 FS leads to “show the students that lots of people write, not just the person they’re really familiar with”.

One FS lead would like to develop opportunities for some FS students to write more extended pieces such as short stories, to move beyond writing which reflected “the first rush of ideas” and towards greater skill development which matched more closely to the kind of expectations of GCSE Language.

One lead wanted to support YAs better and would like to have “something to get them more involved at the beginning of the programme” when they were “fresh”

rather than just building towards National Writing Day at the end when they were “tired” and it perhaps seemed like more of a “chore”.

Another would like the percentage of disadvantaged young people in the FS group to be reduced from 50 % to 40% to allow for inclusion of more students who may be disadvantaged but do not meet the official criteria. (This issue was also picked up in 2021-22 by the same FS lead.) She also highlighted the problem of travel home in the dark and students being put off from engaging with FS because of the difficulty of making alternative travel arrangements or having to walk home safely through “quite a rough estate”.

In 2021-22 two FS leads stressed the need for a “Northern base” for the organisation. They enjoyed the “brilliant” events at Cambridge but felt attendance was tiring for the students, a long way for the school party to travel and that it required a lot of organisation on the staff’s part.

One lead took issue with the amount of “cumbersome” paperwork that needed to be completed and the constant chasing they had to do to get students to complete the forms. They recognised that paper forms were the most effective format for their students but they requested if FS could look into tightening up on the number of forms to be filled in and whether some of the information required could be combined.

One lead stressed, as she had done in the interim evaluation (above), the need for a greater link between GCSE English specifications and the workshop activities. One lead felt that the FS programme seemed to work but that it needed to develop a bit further in order to give YAs more opportunities to develop their leadership skills.

Q9. Additional support needs identified: All four FS leads in 2020-21 valued the support they received from FS in their region and spoke highly of it. Additional CPD opportunities would have been welcomed by all.

One FS lead indicated that perhaps more support for the FS programme should come from inside the school itself. Another spoke of the challenges of working with a writer who was experiencing behaviour management issues which had caused the FS lead to intervene on several occasions. She acknowledged that this was not something raised with FS and that FS writers were not trained teachers but questioned whether training could be perhaps be provided for FS writers. The role of YAs in influencing group behaviours was also discussed as something which could be considered in their initial preparation for the role.

One stated very positively: “everything we do with First Story always ends up being wonderful, even if there's a few complications and bits that might need a bit of tweaking along the way.” Another said “in terms of the way it’s organised and set up and put together, I think there's an awful lot of support. “

In 2021-22 the support provided by the external First Story team was highly praised by four of the five teachers interviewed who felt “totally supported” and identified no additional support needs. One of this group also referred to the support offered by their FS writer who had been very involved and maintained support during the editing and pre-publication stages of their anthology. One described the FS team

and the workshop programme as “a wonderful thing” that she would personally miss as she moved into a new school role but also “a special thing that all the kids [recognise] when you talk to them”

By contrast another FS lead said she felt the school had been left alone with their poet and that check-ins by FS were “a bit disjointed”. She recognised that there were a lot of positives in the programme but the fact that their FS writer had cancelled two sessions in a row was problematic as the students were therefore less keen to attend subsequently. She wanted to address this with FS staff and school colleagues. She suggested that FS should implement a drop in after a few weeks and a mid-year review with FS leads to check on the effectiveness of the programme and any issues arising. This is something that First Story might want to consider.

Question 10 (additional for 2021-22 interviewees only): Your views about capacity to support Young Ambassadors and how the structure of the school year affects this? Much of what was said in response to this question was also touched on in responses to Question 2 (above). Returning to school after the lifting of most Covid pandemic restrictions had proved to be “a difficult adjustment”. Yr 11s in more than one school had previously been very committed but now needed to concentrate their energies in making up for school study time they had lost. All FS lead teachers were evidently extremely stretched, in terms of as one described it, “capacity to support in the ways that First Story imagines” and not able to give the amount of time that they had previously allocated to it. One FS lead suggested that it would be helpful if an additional person from FS could come into school once a month as a ‘new face to respond to’ which would help with support and also perhaps make FS “feel a bit more special”. The same lead commented that the after school online resources provided were “fantastic” but the required follow-ups such as completion of the work book and talking with the students about this had made the sessions seem “too school-based” as well as involving an extra time commitment for staff.

The timing and location of key events in the First Story year were felt to contribute to problems with participation. The timing of the National Writing Day during the examination period and towards the end of the school year made it very difficult for some schools to gain “valid contributions” or to participate in any way at all. Long distance travel to the First Story event in Cambridge was now difficult to justify and negotiate in one school.

The YAs in one school were already preparing for 2022-23 and helping with recruitment for the FS workshop. Another school was planning to launch its anthology in early September rather than July to help stimulate recruitment to the FS programme. They would then run workshops through the Autumn and Spring terms only.

Conclusions

Evaluation methodology: Much of the data was collected in 2020-21 at the end of a series of Student Ambassador leadership training events via one group of students from three different schools. One student worked entirely alone on the diamond ranking due to a fellow Student

Ambassador's lack of home internet access. The collection method was a compromise and, inevitably, presented some difficulties. Nevertheless, the individual graphical elicitation and group diamond ranking activities showed their potential to stimulate contrasting and rich data.

Data collection plans for 2021-22 were reviewed carefully prior to implementation to ensure that they remained fit for purpose and were:

- a. manageable for the schools, FS leads and for the researcher (in terms of capacity, timetabling and the return of completed drawings and other outcomes)
- b. appropriate for exploring the workshop activities/events which take place in schools (either face-to-face or online)
- c. appropriate for the ways in which students are grouped within these activities
- d. flexible in case of a need to respond to potential further lockdown arrangements.

Ethical consent for student and staff participation in face-to-face and online contexts was requested and given via signed email attachment by all participating students, parents and teachers earlier in the data collection process in 2022 than it was possible for FS managers to facilitate in summer 2021.

Sadly I was unable to communicate with two of the selected six schools or to arrange more than one YA focus group, This one group also ran into severe technical difficulties and, due to staff/student capacity, could not be repeated at a later date. This does mean that the overall data collected on students' perspectives is severely limited.

The data collected: FS and FS Schools had to implement the Student Ambassador programme in very different ways than was originally envisaged in each setting during 2020-21. Covid-19 related school closures, the introduction of online provision, student bubble arrangements and the impact of self-isolation have all taken their toll on many well made plans with particular year groups and perhaps on the capacity for SLTs to support FS leads. The imposition of extra class assessments for Yr 10 -11 students and end of year examinations across year groups appear to have also had a notable impact on the, generally older, YAs and their capacity to plan or contribute to particular events. The FS leads interviewed were frustrated by this but It is to the great credit of all concerned that the programme began in some of the schools.

It was difficult to draw extensive overall conclusions from the findings reported in 2020-21 as the schools involved all had such different experiences and differing levels of disruption to their planned activities. The six Student Ambassadors appeared to value the opportunities that their new roles had begun to give them in 2020-2021 and the skills they were developing through their involvement in the programme including the planning of writing events. They expressed commitment to developing the community of writers within their settings, to working with their peers and staff members and to widening access to creative opportunities within and, in one instance, beyond school life. They could also see a future for themselves as writers, a future which may or may not involve working with others in writing-related activities. Their writing futures were envisioned as bringing them pleasure and, in some cases involving ambitious published outcomes such as best sellers, or escape from their everyday working lives.

In 2021-22 it is evident, both from those schools who were either able or unable to participate in this evaluation, that staff capacity to facilitate extra-curricular events and opportunities for evaluative reflection is severely stretched by the teaching and assessment demands placed on them. Many of these demands are very different from those experienced in 2020-21. Similarly, students have experienced severe time pressures to 'catch up' with school learning which they may have missed during the highly disrupted 2020-21 school year and to familiarise themselves with revised GCSE courses and assessment processes in a period when they themselves may well be experiencing

difficulties with their own mental health and well-being. Students' mental health and well-being is clearly an important issue for FS to consider going forward. The zine produced in one of the sample schools is both a credit to the YAs who produced it and a powerful indicator of the need for students to have increased opportunities to reflect on and express their personal thoughts and feelings.

Where schools have shown a commitment to the FS programme they have been able to continue with the FS workshop programme and to introduce some opportunities for their YAs to be involved in workshop sessions, some National Writing Day events and, one case, the editing of a zine. The extent to which schools were able to recruit YAs and to retain their participation throughout the school year has been variable and leads to questions about which Year groups it might be most appropriate to recruit from in the future.

Ensuring participation in the two training modules has been challenging. Two of the six schools originally approached were unable to offer the modules, either due to lack of interest or for reasons unknown. Of the four schools that did participate in one or more of the modules, five students completed both modules, five other students completed one module and two students stepped back from involvement in the modules at some point in the year. Staff capacity to support off timetable/extra-curricular events and students' capacity to participate in them when faced with other demands has been much more evident when considering participation of the modules. It is suggested that the module programme's timetabling and content perhaps needs to be more flexible and constructed with closer attention to what school schedules and students can cope with and/or would like to participate in. The suggestion made by one FS lead about producing an App for First Story students use could also potentially be a way forward here.

I am very grateful to those students and staff who have given their time to participate in this evaluation process over the last two years. The seriousness with which they have responded to the activities and also the commitment they have all shown ensures that creative writing can and should have a significant place in the lives of young people.

Sue Dymoke 29/7/22

Appendices

Appendix 1: Discussion areas explored with YAs in 2021 and 2022.

During this recorded session we would like to ask you to share some thoughts about:

- Why you decided to become Ambassadors
- What you expected it to be like
- How you were prepared for your role
- What the role has involved so far and what you have planned
- What you are enjoying
- How being an ambassador builds on your previous experiences of First Story
- The effect of your ambassador role on your own writing
- What the First Story programme is doing for your school
- Any changes/additions you or your group would like to make to the programme in 2021 – 2022 (or 2022-23 for second focus group).

Appendix 2: Diamond ranking statements.

In our role as Young Ambassadors we are....			
a) becoming more confident	b) making a contribution to our school community	c) supporting other students to express their ideas	Blank for your group to fill in...
d) encouraging other people to enjoy writing	e) learning about the challenges of being a writer	f) now more respected in school	g) developing our organisational skills
h) learning to co-operate with other people	i) helping to make our school a more creative place	j) more informed about publication processes <i>(NB this was a blank card in the 2020-21 interim evaluation)</i>	k) more recognised as writers within our community <i>(NB this was a blank card in the 2020-21 interim evaluation)</i>
Blank for your group to fill in...	Blank for your group to fill in...	Blank for your group to fill in...	X

You have 7 minutes to discuss each statement (and added your own if you wish) and to rank your top 9 in order. One person should then organise the group’s agreed nine top statements into a diamond and remove all other cards. Please add your school’s name to your finished diamond. Your teacher should photograph the diamond and share the image through the chat so we can talk about it.

