

## Creative classroom collaboration

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Passionate Northern Beaches teachers recently ran an experimental workshop for gifted students from eleven primary schools.

The workshop held at North Balgowlah Public School was the brainchild of acting Deputy Principal Rachel Ridley, who said she was looking for ways to challenge and extend the gifted writers in Year 5 and 6 classes.

Reaching out to school principals across the Northern Beaches, she brought together the top writers from eleven primary schools to participate in a whole day creative writing workshop. Ms Ridley partnered with Forest High School English Teacher Lauren Weatherall to have four senior students lead sessions with the younger students.

According to Ms Ridley, the idea for the workshop came about when she was unable to find engaging ways to extend talented students.



*“It started for me with some of the kids who were in my Year 6 class before I moved into the office [as Deputy Principal]. I felt they were incredible and I needed to do something for them. They deserve to have somewhere to go and feel like they are being recognised and given a chance to fly.*

*“When I looked into opportunities for our very capable writers all I found were competitions. In competitions you don’t get feedback, even if you win. There’s no feedback about how you can improve your skills.*

*“I wanted a chance for them to have professional and constructive feedback. We wanted opportunities for them to develop their skills by calling on a range of people as mentors. Today we’ve called on a high school teacher and we’ve also got a children’s author and publisher.*

*“We’ve got a range of people to give these writers a chance to hear different voices about how they can develop their writing skills in different genres,” said Ms Ridley.*



Ms Ridley said she made contact with Ms Weatherall, an English teacher at Forest High School, when she reached out for help putting the workshop together.

*“I know Forest are working hard in that enrichment space, it was my first go-to and I was put in touch with Lauren. I now have that professional relationship with Lauren, which is nice for me as she is so passionate about it.*

*“It’s good to have a partnership as high school and primary school don’t really work that closely together, usually it’s a hand over. It’s nice to have somebody who can help me bridge that gap,”* said Ms Ridley.

Ms Weatherall discovered the workshop not only gave the junior creative writing students opportunities, but her senior students wanted to lead the workshop engagement with their young peers.



*“They were the ones that came up with the initiative. They said, ‘we want to lead this’. Originally I was just going to have them support me but they had so many fantastic ideas I asked them to take the reins.*

*“It’s an opportunity for our students to have leadership opportunities. There’s so many benefits to peer mentoring and it inspires them and leads them as seniors in different directions. It gives them a voice and sense of empowerment.*

*“It’s a great development opportunity for them and for us as teachers. It shows us new possibilities. If we push them and set the bar high, they are more than willing. They’ve got so many ideas themselves about what makes for great teaching.*

*"I wasn't really surprised at their ability to engage the younger students. They are very keen and excited to have a go. As a teacher that's all you want, for them to have a go. They are thriving, they have found their voice.*

*"I've found as a high school teacher there is a problem with how they engage socially now. They rely so heavily on technology to make connections. Opportunities like this force them back into the realm of physical contact, understanding human emotion and body language,"* said Ms Weatherall.



Ms Ridley said the creative writing workshop was an experiment that represented a dynamic approach to teaching that was fully encouraged by the school's Principal, Brooke Keevers.

*"I think we are very lucky with any of the schools I work with on the Beaches, most teachers are committed to the improvement of their pedagogy. It is a dynamic space, they want to do better and inform their practice with evidence.*

*"They want to be doing what the research is telling us actually makes a positive impact on growth and learning. Teachers love what they do and they want to do better, they are willing to try new things and be flexible.*

*"The biggest limit for us is the time and capacity to make it happen but if you take that off the table, I would love to see if we can roll this out, covering from Manly up to St Ives and the Beaches,"* said Ms Ridley.



*"I'd love to get a group of kids in term one and they come to four workshops a year. I think that would be really rich if they had four opportunities a year to do this. Broad scale we could run it across Sydney, let's just grow it.*

*"I know all of our Directors are really on board with working into that high potential space. There's a lot of talent development in terms of working with teacher mentors leading how we are driving high potential curriculum. This fits into our direction where we need to look at how we are adding value to those really capable kids.*

*"As a model you could apply this to any curriculum area. If we can get it working in the writing space, it could be applied in any aspect of schooling. There is such wonderful work going on in all of teaching and public education.*

*"I'm a parent as well and you want to hear about great things happening in schools. This is a legitimately great thing that we wanted to do because we are passionate about learning.*

*"My passion is writing, it always has been. I was really lucky when I was at school, I had teachers that encouraged me. I hope they look back on this and think it was a highlight of their last year at school and they might pursue English into high school and university," said Ms Ridley.*



The event was hosted in the North Balgowlah Public School library, which Teacher Librarian Debbie Horsley said provided the ideal multi-purpose learning space for a workshop.

*“This is the first time we’ve had groups of students from different schools. I love the space and what we can do here, it lends itself to more collaboration.*

*“The high school students have been amazing. It’s so good to see these older students be role models, to hear who they are and what their aspirations are,”* said Ms Horsley.

For the afternoon session, Ms Horsley invited award-winning children’s author and publisher Paul Macdonald, who wrote *The Hole Idea*, to join the workshop and mentor the children in creative writing.

*Images: Northern Beaches Advocate, Lauren Weatherall*