

The Educators' Trust Awards 2025



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THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF EDUCATORS

The Educators' Trust



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FOREWORD

by
Catherine McGuinness CBE

Master of the Worshipful Company of Educators

I am delighted to host the Annual Awards Dinner this evening.

Charitable giving is one of the pillars of the Livery, and the work of the Educators' Trust is an integral part of this Company. Managed by an independent board of trustees, it continues in its dedicated support of the profession of educator.

The awards tonight celebrate the achievements of some remarkable and inspiring educational practitioners: in leadership, in art and design, in theatre and performing arts, in environmental education, and in early years.

The focus on early years for this round of awards is particularly apt. 'Educators opening doors' is my theme for the year. As children increasingly start school with high levels of need and lack of basic life skills, the work of early years practitioners is more important than ever, laying the foundations and opening the doors to greater educational success.

It is a personal (if poignant) pleasure, too, to see the award for a businesswoman who has made a significant contribution to education, named after Mary-Lou Carrington, with whom I served on Common Council.

Warm congratulations to each of the award winners, and I hope you all enjoy your evening.



Introduction to the Awards Programme

by

Dr Jennifer Somerville

Chair of the Board of Trustees



The overarching aim of the Educators' Trust is *'to promote the development of the profession of educator'*. We mainly do this by awarding prizes, bursaries and grants to outstanding individual educators for innovation and excellence in professional practice. The winners may come from any level of education, any subject area and any setting in which learning takes place. We include in the term 'educator' all those professionals who contribute to creating a stimulating, diverse and

supportive environment in which people learn and enrich their lives.

The Trust is able to make awards to these inspirational individuals because of the generosity of members of the Company of Educators and other individuals and organisations who share our values and aspirations for the profession of educator.

Thirteen of these awards will be presented this evening:

- ◇ **The Master's Award for Outstanding School Leadership**
- ◇ **The Mary Lou Carrington Award for a Businesswoman with a significant contribution to education**
- ◇ **The Trust Award for Art & Design Education**
- ◇ **The Keith Hutton Award for Theatre and Performing Arts Education**
- ◇ **The Robert J Jones Award for Environmental Education**
- ◇ **The Inspirational Educator Trust Awards** to eight impressive and inspirational educators working in the field of study chosen every year by the Trustees. This year the theme is ***Early Years Education***.



In addition, the Trust has a **joint bursary scheme with City & Guilds** to support professional development for peer mentoring, generously supported by Past Master Susan Fey and Past Master Peter Warren.

The Franklin Grants for Professional Development, named in honour of the Founding Master of the Company, Professor Raoul Franklin CBE, are open to individual educator applicants of any subject or level of education, whether full-time, part-time or freelance practitioner.



The Judges: The Trust is grateful for the expertise, time and diligence of its award judges: Prof David Skidmore, Enid Weaver, Peter Williams CBE, Dr Anne-Marie Brennan, Prof Martin Collins, Annie Eggar, and Specialist Subject Advisers Ruth Briant and Tony Willenbruch.

BARONESS FLOELLA BENJAMIN, OM, DBE, DL

Baroness Floella Benjamin is one of the most recognisable and well-loved figures in UK public life. She became a household name as the iconic presenter of the BBC's legendary children's programmes, 'Playschool' and 'Playaway', and has retained the public's affection through her boundless commitment to children's education, happiness and welfare, as an author of children's novels, as a producer of children's TV programmes and as an indefatigable campaigner for the improvement of children's lives - their human rights, health, education and welfare throughout the world.



It was not always easy. One of six children, Floella Benjamin left Trinidad by ship aged 10 and arrived in England at Southampton docks on the 2nd September 1960. Initially, she, her two sisters and three brothers lived with her parents in one room in Chiswick in West London. After a series of accommodation upgrades, the family eventually settled in the affluent London suburb of Beckenham, in Kent.

After leaving school at 16 she spent three years in the world of banking and accountancy, but the staid Chief Accountant's Office of Barclays Bank just didn't suit her effervescent personality and she soon found her way into the world of show business, in which she excelled.

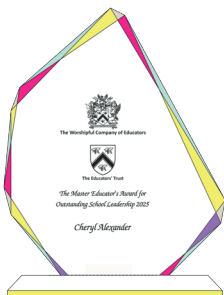
Over the last five decades she has had a diverse and successful career in various sectors of the entertainment industry as an actress,

singer, presenter, writer, independent producer, businesswoman and media regulator, not to mention her ready-meal business, 'Floella Benjamin's Caribbean Kitchen'. She has received many show business awards, including the BAFTA Special Lifetime Award for her services to children's television, the OBE 'for services to broadcasting', and the Women in Film & Television Lifetime Award. She has also received many cultural, community and business awards including the Multi-Cultural Business and Community Lifetime Award, the European Diversity Lifetime Award, the prestigious 'J.M. Barrie Lifetime Achievement Award' for her lasting cultural legacy to children and in 2018 she was made a Freeman of the City of London for her outstanding contribution to the capital. She was the first black woman chancellor of a UK university – Exeter - and she held the role for 10 years. There is now a statue to celebrate her successful chancellorship. In 2020, she was listed in the Powerlist as one of the Top 100 most influential people in the UK of African/African-Caribbean descent.

She was elevated to the peerage in 2010 as Baroness Benjamin of Beckenham and speaks on issues concerning children, women, diversity, media and the arts. In the Lords, she has energetically championed legislation for a range of child protection and welfare issues and chaired the Windrush Commemoration Committee.

She was made a Dame in 2020 for services to charity and was appointed into the Order of Merit in 2022, one of the late Queen's last wishes. She was chosen by King Charles III, to carry the Sceptre with Dove at his coronation.





The Master Educator's Award for Outstanding School Leadership

Winner: Cheryl Alexander

Nominator: The Master Educator, Catherine McGuinness CBE, and Lucy Tallis, Senior High Value Giving Manager, Canine Partners

Cheryl Alexander is a dedicated and inspirational science educator, for whose love of learning she credits her nurturing foster parents. Diagnosed with Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy (RSD) at the age of 18, Cheryl's mobility was significantly impacted, requiring her to use a wheelchair. However, despite these challenges, Cheryl completed an MChem, an MRes in clean chemical technology, and a PGCE. Cheryl has had two assistance dogs through the charity, Canine Partners. She was partnered with her first assistance dog, Orca, in 2003. Orca was awarded the PDSA Gold Medal, the highest honour for a non-military dog, the animal equivalent of the George Cross, for his action in helping to rescue Cheryl after she and her wheelchair plunged into a 20-foot water-filled ditch. After Orca's death, Cheryl was partnered with her second assistance dog, Tyrian. Cheryl credits Orca and Tyrian for enabling her to pursue her education and career.

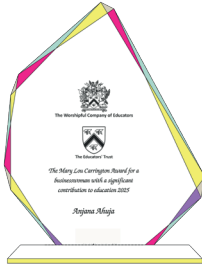
A specialist Chemistry teacher at York High School, her academic success and that as a teacher demonstrates how science can be both engaging and accessible to everyone. She was featured in the 175 Faces of Chemistry by the Royal Society of Chemistry, celebrating her academic achievements and her work in promoting inclusivity in science. She was also featured in the 2014 Royal Society of Chemistry's inclusion report, where she shared her personal journey and the importance of supporting diversity in education.

Cheryl balances academic and life skills by ensuring that students not only learn subject content but also gain experiences that prepare them for the external world. As a form tutor and mentor, she enjoys guiding students through their journey of growth, celebrating their achievements, and helping them take on new challenges and engage with a range of cultural as well as scientific experiences.



Cheryl has become an advocate for individuals with disabilities, in the school, within her profession and in the wider community. Cheryl's leadership is motivated by her desire to improve outcomes for students, helping them develop agency and a sense of control over their futures. She is a role model for students with disabilities, showing that with determination and the right support, students can overcome challenges and pursue successful careers. She is passionate about showing her students that disability does not limit their potential. She believes strongly in the power of representation, explaining that seeing disabled adults living fulfilling lives helps to challenge perceptions and broaden opportunities for young people with disabilities.

Through her promotion of science for all at York High School and her leadership and advocacy in diversity and inclusion, Cheryl is shaping the future of education for all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds.



The Mary-Lou Carrington Award for a Businesswoman with a Significant Contribution to Education.

Winner: Anjana Ahuja

Nominator: Lily Clifford, Head of Inspiration, Speakers for Schools

Mary Lou Carrington was a businesswoman and a Common Councillor in the City of London with a passionate commitment to education. A founding member of the Educators, this award is in her memory.

Speakers for Schools (SfS) is a charity founded in 2011 by the broadcaster, Robert Peston. It provides leading industry professionals and academics to speak, free of charge, to students in state schools, to share their knowledge, insights and experience, and to inspire and motivate them.

Anjana is an award-winning British freelance science journalist who writes a weekly column for the Financial Times. She has previously

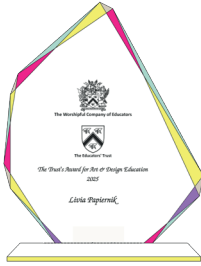


written for The Times, The Telegraph, Prospect and New Scientist. Her articles have picked up two Association of British Science Writers Awards and she won the 1998 EMMA award for Best Print Journalism. Her 2021 book on the lessons of the Covid Pandemic, entitled 'Spike: The Virus versus the People', co-written with Government Adviser, Sir Jeremy Farrar, was a bestseller and shortlisted for two major book awards.

Speakers for Schools recruited Anjana to the network in 2015 and over that period she has delivered many school talks. Anjana has dedicated herself to convincing school students about the lifetime value of going to university. She demonstrates this through describing her own journey from growing up in an immigrant family and attending a local comprehensive in Essex, to Imperial College, London, where she studied Physics, leading to a PhD in Space Physics. Anjana talks about how it feels to move out of your comfort zone and gives tips on how to overcome challenges, develop resilience and learn to persist.

After university, she was hired by The Times as a graduate trainee journalist and gradually achieved recognition in the field of science journalism, a field traditionally dominated by men. Anjana emphasises to students how to use failure positively as a learning tool. In the Speaker for Schools programme, Anjana describes journalism as a profession, the variety of types of journalism, how to gain entry and possible career paths within it. An ambassador for science education, especially for girls, Anjana actively promotes the wide variety of career opportunities to which good qualifications in science can lead.

Anjana makes a wider contribution to education. She helped to organise a series of lectures for the Royal Institute highlighting the research of young scientists and has delivered masterclasses on science journalism at City University London. She has also been a charity trustee at Sense about Science, which encourages early career scientists to participate in public discussions, and a school governor, further demonstrating her commitment to education and young people.



The Trust Award for Art & Design Education

Winner: Livia Papiernik

Nominator: Dr Rashid Aziz, Director of Education, The Royal School of Needlework, (RSN) Hampton Court

The Royal School of Needlework, the first patron of which was Queen Victoria in 1875, is a highly specialist centre for new bespoke embroidery commissions and replicas of antique textiles, as well as for restoration and conservation projects. Since then, its studio artists have designed the gowns and accoutrements of royalty for state occasions, such as nine pieces for the 2023 Coronation, including the King's Robe of State and the Queen's Robe of Estate, as well as for contemporary celebrity fashion designers. It also has a thriving educational programme from beginner to degree level, both on site and online, nationally and internationally.

Livia is a highly respected professional in the high-end design industry and a Lecturer in Experimental Hand Embroidery at RSN. She uses her expertise in the specialised embroidery industry to teach students dynamically and innovatively, integrating live projects that blend their technical craft understanding with contemporary practices. She has cultivated meaningful industry connections, enabling students to grasp how their lessons translate into professional outcomes and what contemporary, innovative embroidery entails.

Livia's professional standing in the industry enables her to engage students with prestigious design studios and renowned artists such as Alexander McQueen, providing a rare opportunity to observe the sampling and embroidery processes behind a luxury brand. Students experience a tour of the Alexander McQueen headquarters and participate in a live project with individual feedback sessions from the brand's head of embroidery. Livia has also secured work for students with the luxury brand, Lock & Co., designing headpieces and caps for live briefs and creating limited-edition bowler hats for the company's

175th anniversary. Her direct involvement in these projects, including her own design contributions to the autumn/winter collection, serves as a model for students, demonstrating the intricacies of collaborative work and the high standards required in the industry. These collaborations, led by Livia, provide students with unparalleled exposure to professional expectations and craftsmanship at the highest level.

Recognising the evolving demands of the embroidery industry, Livia introduced the 'Couture Embroidery' workshop, bridging traditional RSN craftsmanship with the fast-paced skills required for freelance work. This initiative provides students with the practical knowledge necessary to excel as freelance embroiderers—often their first step into the professional world—offering financial stability and the opportunity to explore various career paths.



The success of Livia's students illustrates her influence and impact as an educator. Several graduates have achieved recognition in prestigious competitions, with one student selected for the TexPlus mentoring scheme. Others have won awards from the Worshipful Company of Borderers, and a first-year student triumphed in the Glove Competition organized by the Worshipful Company of Glovers. These achievements underscore Livia's ability to inspire and prepare her students for success in competitive and professional environments.



Keith Hutton Award in Theatre and Performing Arts Education

Winner: Sigrun Sævarsdóttir-Griffiths

Nominator: Dr Armin Zanner, Vice-Principal & Director of Music, Guildhall School of Music and Drama

The Guildhall School is one of the top five higher education institutions in the world for music and the performing arts. It is also a leading UK provider of lifelong learning in the creative arts, reaching over 3,500 children and young people through its Guildhall Young Artist and Music programme.

Sigrun's role at Guildhall is to lead on the Social Arts Practice Masters Elective at Guildhall. She is a musician, educator and leader of creative and collaborative music making. Her specialism is work with marginalised communities, particularly in the areas of mental health, adult rehabilitation and homelessness.

Central to Sigrun's approach to craft acquisition in education is the integration of students into the work of professional practitioners, by structuring courses that involve students in delivering practical projects. She has set up dozens of projects enabling students to collaborate with members of the public and young people in primary and secondary schools, SEND schools, community centres, hospitals and hospices. As artistic director of the *Dialogue Festival*, Sigrun involved Guildhall students in composing and performing new music collaboratively with people of all ages from East London communities. This social arts practice develops the students' craft in very different environments from those of their college performance training. The approach offers creative and exciting opportunities in music-making for people from underprivileged backgrounds, while simultaneously providing Guildhall students with a different environment to innovate musically.

Her nominator commented: 'Sigrun's dynamic and innovative work bringing professional social arts directly into the university curriculum has been transformative at Guildhall and elsewhere.'

A further example of Sigrun's creative blending of education

and practice, is the 35-piece band The Messengers, comprised of students and people with personal experience of homelessness. This very successful initiative developed into a community interest group, *MetamorPhonics*, with a network of bands in universities and homeless charities in Leicester, Los Angeles and Iceland, many of which have played at major music venues, recorded for international record labels and won music awards.

Her international reputation as an educator-practitioner is growing.



She has been selected to present at the global gathering of art music professionals, the *Classical:NEXT 2025* Conference in Berlin.

She is regarded by the *Wearethecity* website as one of their Inspirational Women.





The Robert J Jones Award for Environmental Education

Winner: Simon Lightman

Nominator: Abigail Tinkler, Head of Learning, Natural Environment, City of London Corporation

King Edward's School Witley (KESW) is an independent, day and boarding school for girls and boys aged 11-18. The school is part of the City of London Corporation Family of Schools.

Simon Lightman is Head of Philosophy & Religious Studies and Assistant Head of House at KESW. He is a passionate advocate for environmental sustainability, and his leadership enabled the school to achieve the Eco Schools Green Flag accreditation in 2024.

Simon is deeply engaged with multi-disciplinary approaches to environmental education,

integrating philosophy, science, governance, and social action. His approach to sustainability education is underpinned by systems thinking, encouraging students to critically evaluate the broader implications of their environmental actions. By highlighting the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and political systems, Simon helps students understand the complexity of sustainability and the need for holistic solutions. His teaching encourages students to make connections across disciplines and develop empathy and compassion for both the natural world and communities affected by environmental degradation.

At KESW Simon founded a student-led ECO Schools Accreditation Committee. The committee addressed waste, water conservation, energy efficiency, and the shift to a plastic-free environment. Initiatives included litter pickups, creating a sustainability garden, and collaborating with the Estate Management Team to install solar panels. Through these actions, Simon demonstrated how sustainable solutions to environmental problems could be embedded into everyday life.



More widely, Simon spreads good practice through collaboration: with teachers from the City of London Family of Schools; with Surrey University's Institute of Sustainability; and with staff from the City of London Corporation, with whom he established a Natural Environment Youth Board (NEYB). This enables young people to have an active voice in decision-making around sustainability and the environment whilst developing their own knowledge and skills. By providing young people with a platform to influence sustainability education and advocacy at a citywide level,

this initiative empowers students to engage with decision-makers, fostering responsibility and agency, and highlights the importance of governance in driving sustainable change. It also equips them with problem-solving and leadership skills and fosters a sense of responsibility for real-world challenges.

Simon's ability to teach, inspire and empower students make him an outstanding candidate for the R J Jones Award in Environmental Education.





The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Chris Chorley

Nominator: Professor Penny Hay, Bath Spa University

Chris Chorley is Executive Headteacher at St Vigor and St John Church School, The Mill Nursery, Chilcompton and St Aldhelm's Church Primary School, Shepton Mallet, Somerset.

Central to Chris's vision for his schools are four key dispositions developed in children within and beyond the classroom: being adventurous, being ethical, being connected and being unique. He is influenced by the approach of Reggio Emilia where the children express their ideas in a 'hundred languages', with time, space and attention to explore multi-modal inquiries. Chris has been involved in a long-term research project, School Without Walls, inspired by the practice of Reggio Emilia, which has provided him with a good understanding of action research methods and techniques pertinent to the understanding of the effectiveness of different approaches, strategies and interventions — of what works with early years and primary school children.

Chris enables this to happen by ensuring that all teachers take a creative and differentiated approach to children's engagement, using a wide range of learning resources to ensure inclusion, equity and diversity. The schools provide interesting, engaging, creative, and nurturing environments for all children, working closely and constructively with parents, carers and communities.

As Executive Head, Chris has overseen a tangible and sustained impact on the educational development of the pupils in his schools. In each of the schools he supports, there is evidence of pupil progress, in terms of cognitive, social, and emotional development. Ongoing classroom research measures the effectiveness of the learning environment in terms of well-being, creative engagement, oracy and children's active citizenship. Parental engagement has increased,

pupil attendance and national standards of achievement have improved – all children were able to thrive as creative learners.

Chris believes that continuous professional development is the key to a school's success. He ensures that staff in his schools are supported in continuing to learn about developments in professional practice. He also teaches and mentors on the teacher training programme and the professional development courses for experienced teachers at Bath Spa University.

Chris is an outstanding educator specialising in early childhood education and learning in challenging settings, ensuring outstanding practice and creative learning for all children, no matter what their background or circumstance.





The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Molly Devlin

Nominator: Felicity Gillespie, Programme Board Leader, Ark Start Early Years

Ark Start is a family of eight school-based nurseries, set up by the Ark Schools network of 39 academies which serve over 30,000 children. The schools and nurseries operate exclusively in areas of high socio-economic deprivation, with around 50% of children entitled to free school meals (FSM) (24% national average).

Molly Devlin is the headteacher of Ark Start, responsible for the running of all eight settings. She is not only the leader of the nurseries but also the Ark Schools Network Lead, providing training and expertise on early years curriculum and pedagogy to primary heads and early years leads. She is the essential link between nursery and primary schools.

She has an exceptional knowledge of child development and contemporary practice. Drawing on different schools



of thought, her approach continues to evolve, based on research evidence and the constant testing of new ideas and approaches to address the most seemingly intractable challenges facing individual children. She never takes the easy path over the right path, fighting for every child. Under Molly's leadership, no child is labelled 'special needs' but every child has its individual needs met, whatever they may be.

Molly's impact has been impressive. Since opening in 2020, 89% of children who attended Ark Start have achieved the Good Level of Development (GLD) by the end of Reception year, despite around 61% being entitled to FSM. This compares to the 2024 national GLD outcomes of 67.7%.

The impact of Molly's leadership is acknowledged nationally. She has been funded through Ark Start to adapt the SEEN neuroscience training programme developed by the University of Oxford for use with nursery staff and with nursery parents and carers. The programme focuses on the development of neural networks in the brain and the role of neuroplasticity (the influence of experiences on the structure of the brain) in which early childhood experiences and the role of carers are shown to be critical. The course has been recognised as a new additional unit to existing qualifications by the Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education (CACHE).

Molly is regularly called upon to speak at conferences, most recently at the national conference of the Association for Science Education. In recognition of her sector-leading expertise on the neurodevelopment of young children and the development of related teaching materials for nursery staff and for parents, Molly was consulted by the Education Endowment Fund on the Early Years Toolkit, ensuring that evidence-based approaches to early years are the standard. She was also appointed as an expert advisor for Ofsted's Curriculum, Teaching and Assessment external reference group.

Small wonder, then, that The Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, selected Ark Start Oval as her first education setting visit in the week after the 2024 election.



The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Rachel Higginson

**Nominator: Jenna Crittenden, Teacher Advocacy Lead,
Chartered College of Teaching**

Following a career in Early Years and Primary Education, latterly as Primary Trust lead, Rachel Higginson is now working nationally as a freelance creative education consultant and system developer across the country and abroad. Rachel became convinced of the importance of oracy in children's educational development, that is language and listening interventions in the classroom that explicitly extend pupils' spoken vocabulary, whether that is the articulation of ideas or spoken expression of emotional content.

This commitment has led Rachel to investigate the research evidence on oracy in young children and to work with a range of experts from diverse backgrounds to develop a programme for use in education that is right for the age and the stage of the pupils. That means that the social and emotional needs of the child drive the curriculum choices. It also strives to be socially, disability and ethnically inclusive and accessible.

Rachel founded an oracy-based programme, '*Findingmyvoice*' for school use and has worked with various school groups and communities to refine and develop it so that all primary schools can use it to develop their community and individual voices. It aims to connect pupils' lives to that of a powerful narrative and nurtures both the physical voices of pupils – the ability to express oneself confidently and authentically in any situation - and their metaphorical voices – accessing one's values, strengths, talents, and passions to live a purposeful life. It is having a growing impact across the country.

She has also worked within a school for the Chartered College of Teaching's long-term project in collaboration with the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, '*RethinkingCurriculum*'. This project aims to support and equip teachers and school leaders with the knowledge

and skills to identify, plan, and implement curriculum development work in a sustainable, context-specific approach that will have long-term impact. She supported the staff to develop a creative bespoke curriculum that had a considerable impact on the measured cognitive and social abilities of the pupils in just 12 weeks. Rachel has been instrumental in the development of an oracy toolkit freely available as part of the *RethinkingCurriculum* project. She has also been invited to be part of the North-East Primary Innovators sessions, sharing the work of *Findingmyvoice* and building on the work of *RethinkingCurriculum*.



Rachel is a collaborator for the educational consultants, Myatt & Co.

She has written the DFE approved curriculum for a South West free school, and is the Education Consultant for the children's publisher, Redan.





The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Rebecca Jackson

**Nominator: Jenna Crittenden, Teacher Advocacy Lead,
Chartered College of Teaching**

Rebecca Jackson is Headteacher at Cragside Primary School, a large local authority school of over 400 pupils in Newcastle.

Rebecca is an exceptional school leader, putting into practice the concept that leadership is a collaborative endeavour, and that every teacher is a leader. She has removed systematic barriers to creative curriculum design and developed a teaching team where every staff member leads in one aspect of the school's work or another. The children at the school benefit from the leadership, knowledge and skills of all teachers and a coherent curriculum framework understood by all staff. There is an ethos of hard work but also a joy in learning that pervades the school. This is reflected in the pupils' performance in national tests, which is significantly above the national average.

The collaborative systems Rebecca has developed within the school have been applied beyond the school gates to engage parents, carers and the local community. She uses the arts and creativity to develop partnerships that drive opportunities for her school. From Shakespeare collaboratives with several local schools to developing the North-East Primary Innovators Group, she strives to change the landscape of education for the pupils, her staff team and the local community. Rebecca engaged with the Northeast Creativity Collaborative initiative to test approaches to embedding teaching for creativity in all subjects in the curriculum including science, technology and English alongside arts-based subjects. Cragside Primary was appointed lead school in September 2023. Cragside's commitment to the arts was rewarded by the Platinum Gold Artsmark, following its previous Gold Artsmark rating. It hosts teacher professional development workshops in the area of creativity and the arts, and has embraced the concept and practice of oracy

and the empowerment that this provides to the children. It also has an Outstanding rating from Ofsted. Rebecca has also developed partnerships with the local universities to ensure that the pupils and staff she serves have access to opportunities beyond the primary curriculum.



Rebecca is highly respected in the North-East Primary Innovators Group as a creative collaborative leader and collaborative developer. She serves the North-East education system proudly and fiercely. She is also acknowledged nationally as an outstanding early years practitioner. A dedicated advocate for educational excellence, Rebecca is a Fellow of both the Chartered College of Teaching and the Royal Society of Arts, as well as an associate member of the Association of Education Advisers. Rebecca is committed to ensuring that all children have access to a rich and engaging school life, regardless of their socio-economic background. Her expertise in this area extends to published work, having contributed a chapter to the AoEA's series, 'Advising on School Improvement', where she explored strategies for reducing the cost of education and improving accessibility for all children and their families.



The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Bethany Mitchell

Nominator: Anish Harrison, National Literacy Trust Swindon

Bethany is nominated through the lens of literacy. She works closely with the National Literacy Trust in Swindon in her role as Literacy Lead at Seven Fields Nursery and Primary School in the urban area of Penhill which is ranked in the top 25% of the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

Bethany Mitchell is an exceptional Early Years teacher with an understanding of not only the educational needs of her pupils, but also their emotional, social and socioeconomic needs. She is driven by a child-centred approach which forms the basis of her work and hence leads to supporting the community in which the children live.

Some of the children who arrive to the pre-school are nonverbal and parents often present as not wanting to engage with the school. This is due to complex socioeconomic stressors, parental experiences of the school system, the family learning environment from which the children come from and SEND. Bethany works closely with her counterpart, Gena Bird, who oversees the 2–3-year-olds, to understand the complex requirements and strengths of the children

Bethany applies a leadership strategy which puts integration at the heart of her work. This involves an evidence-base in the ecological theory of child development, extending learning to support the home learning environment, alongside the individualised learning needs of the children. Knowing who the children are and what motivates them is key to her multifaceted approach, tapping into the children's 'funds of knowledge' to help motivate them to learn. For example, Bethany works with her team to ensure a range of partners are involved in the children's education, including the National Literacy Trust (NLT). This enhances the learning experience of the children who walk through the door and includes whole-family engagement sessions

facilitated by the NLT, which are designed to be welcoming and non-threatening. These are bolstered by storytelling events, which reinforce literacy as a pleasurable activity.

Alongside this, Bethany also understands that access to reading materials is essential, so that children can develop a life-long love of reading. She has engaged with the NLT's library development programme, which provides professional training on the importance of diverse and inclusive texts. There is great pride in the library space, and it is an important feature of the school. For older children, this is supported by author visits and opportunities to develop a love of writing. In doing so, Bethany is building the children's cultural capital and supporting oracy practice.



The result of this focus on literacy has paid dividends. Despite its intake, Seven Fields' 'Good Level of Development' sits at 71.4%, whilst the Local Authority's overall GLD sits at 67.5%.

This is an impressive achievement and one that highlights the inspirational work of Bethany Mitchell.





The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Chinami Sakai

Nominator: Helen Charman, Director of Learning, Young V & A

Chinami Sakai is Senior Producer for Informal Learning at Young V&A in Bethnal Green, part of the V&A's family of museums. Formerly the Museum of Childhood, it was relaunched as Young V&A in June 2023 as a place for young people to imagine, play, design and get inspired.

Chinami was integral to the development of Young V&A's which includes a designated area for 0–2 year olds, '*Mini Museum*', building on the Reggio Emilia idea of the environment as the 'third teacher.' She established approaches to facilitate collaboration and learning which enabled the museum's youngest stakeholders (children 0–5) to meaningfully inform the museum's plans through play. In the *Play Hacks* project, whole families worked together to support their youngest children. During the sessions, Chinami guided designers and participants to explore educational theorists, including Maria Montessori, through creative materials and physical play together. One of the key findings was that every child and family was creative in their own unique way. It also affirmed the Young V&A approach that practical and creative 'making' activities are effective learning tools for everyone in a family.

As part of Young V&A's regular programme of Early Years Education, Chinami developed '*Sound Explorers*', built through community co-creation sessions in children and family centres. It supports the development of speech and language skills in young children through object handling, singing, rhyming and sensory play. '*Sound Explorers*' is a popular offer that fills the museum with families on a weekly basis. Chinami developed '*Mini Play*' sessions collaboratively with a Montessori practitioner and Young V&A's Lead Creative Facilitators. The sessions explore themes from the museum in ways that are mapped to the developmental needs of babies and

young children and support parents, including those who are referred through Council early intervention teams.

Chinami also co-managed *'Summer of Play'* in 2021–2, a series of events in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets at local primary schools, festivals and children's centres. She leads an annual legacy event, *National Play Day* at Young V&A, where children are experts in play – it's a way to have fun, build relationships, experiment with ideas and materials, and to learn new skills and knowledge. She has been central to positioning the museum as a learning space that bridges home learning and nursery/school experience. Pop-up performances, storytelling festivals and interactive events help families see how they can stimulate their children, take inspiration from the world around them, and use the museum as a safe place to enjoy time together.

Chinami's work is embedded in childhood philosophy, play and theory. She has spoken on the importance of childhood theory, play in early years development and co-design, at various conferences including Kids in Museums, South West Federation of Museums and internationally in Tokyo and Paris.





The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Sheree Tralau

Nominator: Tina Hart, Regional Manager, Ormiston Families

Ormiston Trust provides funding, support and resources for children and families, working in partnership with other charities across the country. The *Breaking Barriers Service* supports children and families affected by the imprisonment of a parent or close family member.

Sheree Tralau is a Senior Practitioner at *Breaking Barriers Essex*, with extensive experience of working with children, young people and vulnerable adults.

Children affected by the imprisonment of a parent or close family member face overwhelming odds through no fault of their own.

They experience shame and stigma for a crime they did not commit and often suffer disenfranchised grief. Sheree works within a community in Essex where high levels of crime have resulted in several children experiencing the loss of one or both parents and/or a close family member. Sheree has provided training, education and continuing support to



school staff on how children are affected by witnessing crime, the arrest and the imprisonment of a loved one. A positive outcome of Sheree's work has been an improvement in school engagement. For example, a five-year-old child was on a reduced timetable and at risk of permanent exclusion. The school believed that he could not manage a classroom environment. However, in sessions with Sheree he demonstrated he was able to co-regulate with support to focus on a task, communicate, play, engage and enjoy learning for extended periods. The child returned to attending school full-time.

Sheree works collaboratively with children and parents described as 'hard to reach' by other professionals. Through her non-judgemental and compassionate approach, Sheree has achieved not only in engaging but in building positive relationships with parents in a way that has resulted in them feeling strong enough to access further support. For example, a mother avoided any engagement with school, but after Sheree's intervention, the mother started coming into the school and attending meetings about her children and felt empowered to voice her opinions.

Sheree is creative in the way she works with children, meeting them where they are at, and providing resources and activities that interest and inspire them. All her interactions with children are child-led; she helps each child to feel unique and valued. Sheree can identify when children are unable to verbalise their thoughts and feelings. She is trained in sand tray therapy, which enables some of the younger and/or dysregulated children to tell their story and process their worries and fears through this type of communication.

Sheree has supported children affected by the imprisonment of a parent across the county of Essex. She has made a positive impact on their emotional well-being with their overall outcomes. Her professionalism and integrity along with her hard work and commitment are recognized in this award.





The Inspirational Educator Awards for Early Years Education

Winner: Becky Watanabe

Nominator: Professor Eva Lloyd-Reichling, Chair, and Zoe Raven, CEO, Acorn Early Years

Acorn Early Years is a charitable social enterprise operating 17 day nurseries across Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire, as well as several out-of-school clubs, forest schools, and a training and consultancy service.

Becky Watanabe is an Early Years Manager at Acorn, supporting the nurseries with their pedagogy and curriculum, and the emotional wellbeing of the children. She is also a trainer and consultant, inspiring and supporting early years professionals within Acorn, as well as across the wider early years sector to maintain high-quality practice and provision.

Becky is extremely knowledgeable and continually researches the field of early years theory and practice to find out how to ensure children get the best care and education. She is an active member of the Acorn action research team, currently working on the key person approach. She has a specific interest in emotional wellbeing and early brain development which is at the core of all her training. Becky has worked with external trainers and other experts in the sector, delivering to conferences and external teams, as well as to Acorn's 17 nurseries, in line with its ethos and relational pedagogy.

She is skilful in adapting the terminology she uses to suit her audience to ensure everyone has a full understanding. She is particularly known for her expertise in supporting children's behaviour, and inclusive practice. Not only has this developed practice among staff across the Acorn settings, but also among parents for whom Becky has delivered workshops to support them in using a positive approach. This means that children have a consistent approach to supporting behaviour both in the home and at nursery.



The variety of training Becky delivers is often bespoke to the individual needs of the setting, taking into account not only the ethos, values and pedagogy, but also the individual needs of the children and nursery, and the local community where the nursery is based. Becky supports educators with their understanding of diversity and the implementation of inclusive practice, and in understanding and supporting cultural capital. Practitioners

comment on the range of ideas that Becky gives them to provide children with first-hand, rich learning experiences, activities that encourage artistic creativity, and how to source and develop a wide range of sustainable resources that offer awe, wonder and experiential learning.

Becky works alongside nursery teams as a role model, delivering training by professional discourse with individual practitioners to enable them to understand the rationale behind best practice, and inspiring them with fresh, creative ideas.

Becky is particularly in demand from the nursery teams for her support with enabling environments and for inspiring creativity, as well as ensuring consistency in the way practitioners support challenging behaviour by role modelling and delivering training.

In 2023, Becky was a finalist for *Nursery World's* Trainer of the Year.



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