

Leading authors are trying to unleash the creativity of pupils 'stifled' by the national curriculum, writes Sian Griffiths

**M**ichael Morpurgo, the best-selling children's author, is up in arms. The writer, whose book *War Horse* has been turned into a film by Steven Spielberg that premieres today, thinks lessons in state schools are boring.

Morpurgo, a former primary school teacher, blames the national curriculum and schools' focus on tests and exams for stifling children's natural curiosity and desire to learn.

"We've got ourselves into a really terrible trap," he said last week. "Successive governments have shouted about exams, exams, exams and tests, tests, tests. The curriculum has become tighter and narrower. They've forgotten the need to allow children to develop their creative talents."

As an antidote, Morpurgo, along with other writers including Louis de Bernières and Gervase Phinn, is backing an enterprise that is fast spreading nationwide.

Morpurgo is chancellor of the Children's University, which is helping thousands of youngsters aged seven to 14 to develop their talents by encouraging them to take part in activities ranging from ceramics and Japanese classes to sports reporting, philosophy and astronomy.

The university validates activities at hundreds of centres across the country. They include Chatsworth house, the Royal Shakespeare Company, B&Q, dance studios, riding schools and after-school clubs.

"The great thing about the scheme is that it targets those children who need and want to learn more and spend time in a way that is fulfilling," says Morpurgo. "It's like a club for developing their talents that other children also belong to and that is fun and not just work."

Children are given a "passport" to record their activities. So far about 20,000 have been issued. When they have completed 30 hours of weekend, after-school or holiday classes, they "graduate" at a special ceremony.

"The kids wear miniature caps and gowns, their mums and dads turn up, it's a rather special day," says Ger Graus, chief executive of the Children's University, which is run from an office in Manchester with a staff of four. Investment banks, charities and the Department for Education are among those funding the non-profit-making organisation. The only



The Children's University let Megan Boyden, 15, try her hand at sports reporting

## The university of fun

charge to a child is £2 for the passport and the cost of any fee-paying activity.

There are rewards for those who continue to attend after completing 30 hours. Some time this year the first child to notch up 1,000 hours of activities will be named.

Helen Boyden, from Colchester, Essex, admits she cried at last year's graduation ceremony for her daughter Megan, now 15. A keen competitive swimmer, Megan took part in a sports reporting course, which included meeting journalists at the BBC and blogging from the press box at Colchester United and Arsenal football clubs. Since then she has spoken on stage about her experiences.

"It has given her immense confidence and opened a lot more doors for her," says Boyden, whose sister-in-law, a primary school teacher, was so inspired by Megan's efforts that she opened a sewing club after school so that her own pupils could start a passport.

Megan says: "I went to Manchester and spoke at a conference about my experiences. It was a lot more personal than lessons in school and it was fun." Now she is considering a career as a sports reporter.

The scheme was born after the government launched a new national curricu-

lum in 2007. Tim Brighouse, then director of education in Birmingham, opened the first Children's University centre in the city that year.

Graus says: "The motivation was that because the national curriculum was pushing excitement out of the classroom, we decided that what teachers could no longer do in schools, we would do out of hours."

"I have a 14 and a 16-year-old. When I ask them why they go to school they say 'because I have to' and 'to pass exams'. Then they go to these out-of-hours activities and can't stop talking about them. We want children and their parents to realise that if you know why you are learning something, if you enjoy it and you see a purpose to it, the chances of you succeeding are much higher than if you are simply blindly following a national literacy and numeracy strategy."

Since 2007 the organisation has grown. The latest plan is to extend activities to five and six-year-olds, which will happen later this year.

Research shows children who are members of the university do better at school. For the past three years John MacBeath, a Cambridge professor, has been moni-

toring the progress of participants aged seven, 11 and 14. In 2010 he found that a sample of 1,270 children who had attended the university "did better on what we call the three As: attendance, attitude and attainment" than a matched sample who were not members. This included achieving higher scores at national tests in English, maths and science.

For Morpurgo, it is the Children's University's encouragement of creative writing and love of drama that he finds most valuable.

"When I was teaching, you had freedom in our little primary school to read stories for a half hour at the end of the day or to listen to the children's own stories. You had time and you had room. That's been taken away and that's one of the things that's going on at the Children's University. It's a brilliant way to get children inspired again."

For more information, go to [childrensuniversity.co.uk](http://childrensuniversity.co.uk)

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**ST** Watch the trailer for the movie version of *War Horse* at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/newsreview](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/newsreview)