

Raindrops: poetry in motion

BA Festival of Science

From the maths of Morris dancing to the theory of science fiction, the annual festival reaches beyond traditional boundaries to explore the subject's relationship with other areas, most notably the arts. **Stephen Manning** reports

Is the moment a raindrop splashes into water science or art? For Anne Osbourn, it is both. She uses images from science to inspire pupils to produce writing or artwork about the subject and, at the same time, stimulate creativity and scientific curiosity.

She believes flouting conventional divisions between subjects can bring out the best in pupils. She says: "I have seen incredible things come out of children with seemingly conventional abilities."

"We want to understand the world around us, whether we are scientists, poets, business people or plumbers. It's about finding out how you fit into the world."

Ms Osbourn practises what she preaches. She is a senior plant scientist at the John Innes Centre, a microbiology research laboratory, in Norwich and a published poet.

She has devised the Science Arts Writing initiative, which was launched at the British Association for the Advancement of Science Festival last week, after a pilot scheme in seven Norwich schools. An estimated 20,000 people attended during the week, including 4,500 pupils from schools in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex.

Ms Osbourn devised the initiative during a sabbatical year, funded by NESTA, the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts Dreamtime Fellowship, at the School of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia.

The initiative focuses on linking subjects and it is hoped it could help combat science's ailing profile. The number of pupils taking A-level physics, for example, has halved in just over two decades, from 55,728 in 1982 to 28,119 in 2005, according to a recent report by Professor Alan Smithers and Dr Pamela Robinson, of Buckingham university. The report stated that government attempts to



Science or art? Using scientific pictures to inspire pupils in writing or artwork can create a curiosity in the subject that flouts convention

stop the decline have all failed.

Pupils are confronted with images ranging from dust mites and views from space, to human nerve cells and a raindrop splashing in water. A teachers' handbook is being developed, part funded by Society in Science.

Ms Osbourn hopes that, with the help of the National Science Learning Centre, the project can be used across the UK. She would, how-

ever, like to see schools develop their own programmes rather than have a set national course. Artwork and poems by pupils from Norfolk's Rockland St Mary primary and Framingham Earl high, have been already collated for a book, *See Saw*, which is being sold to fund more projects.

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Just call me Cilla, says Phil

Stephen Manning

Phil Smith sees himself as a matchmaker – the Cilla Black of education. She arranged blind dates on her television show, he pairs teachers with scientists

Dr Smith is co-ordinator of Norfolk's teacher scientist network which links teachers and scientists to give pupils a clearer idea of science in action.

"Most teachers say they want more professional development," said Dr Smith. "This is a very good way of doing it. Scientists can put current knowledge directly into the classroom."

The nature of the teacher-scientist relationship depends entirely on the teacher. "The scientist is working with the teacher, not the school," said Dr Smith.

Some teachers are looking for enrichment: to be stretched beyond their normal comfort zone. Others might be unsure about performing practical science and are looking for several pointers.

"For the less confident, we typi-

cally provide half-a-day's supply cover, then offer planning time between the scientist and the teacher," said Dr Smith. "In 99 per cent of cases, the scientist will end up in the classroom alongside the teacher."

The network which oversees an estimated 60 partnerships, receives £40,000 a year from the Gatsby Charitable Trust, but the funding is due to end next year.

Dr Smith, a plant pathologist, has worked with Maxine Woods, a former primary teacher in Norfolk and now head of Quarry Hill junior, in Grays, Essex, for seven years.

She said: "Phil and I hit it off immediately. We shared a general passion for school science. He visits my school about four or five times a year and the children respond positively to having a real scientist in the lesson."

"We balance exploration, demonstration and hands-on practical work for the children. I have taught cell biology to Years 5 and 6, which would not have been possible without Phil's input."

'Ban the school lunchbox junk'

Jon Slater

Pupils should be banned from eating unhealthy food at school – even if parents pack their lunchboxes, a health expert believes.

Jane Wardle of University college, London said tough new rules are needed to halt the increase in childhood obesity and ensure new nutritional guidelines for school meals have an impact on children's health.

Professor Wardle said pupils at risk of obesity would stop eating school meals if given the choice of healthy dinners from the canteen or their favourite junk food in a packed lunch.

She said her research showed 80 per cent of parents of obese children thought they were a "normal weight" and that they were in a state of denial about their children's weight.

Professor Wardle admitted it would be difficult to police pupils' eating habits but a first step would be for schools to advise parents on appropriate food.

Professor Wardle, who criti-

cised the National Association of Head Teachers for accepting sponsorship for its annual conference from the fast-food chain McDonald's, has called for a ban on advertising junk food to children.

She says the Government should consider placing cigarette-style warning labels on unhealthy foods. "A lot of the media have been against anything that can be labelled as the nanny state," she said. "My own opinion is we need some nanny state controls."

She believes such measures are needed as children are growing up in an environment which is far more conducive to obesity than that of 30 years ago. The cost of food has declined by 10 to 20 per cent, while improved transport and technological aids mean people do far less exercise.

Professor Wardle said the Government should consider legal restrictions on the size of portions served by fast-food restaurants and increasing the cost to the public of making short journeys by car or public transport.

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