1. Worked from first-hand observation.

2. Through talk encouraged children to notice detail, see relationships, ask questions and consider possible answers.

3. Made children think rather than learn by rote so that they took responsibility for their own learning, used their initiatives, and thought things out for themselves.

(Too much of this sort of work has now been given a theoretical basis in research by Joan Wright, Douglas Barnes, and Gordon Wells.)

Immediate environment: the classroom — displays, choice of objects, make picture with words.

On field trips, use 5 senses — procession, illustration, peel, paint, fabric.

Visits to local church, library followed by many others.

Teacher should be a good, encouraged, a delighted guide, a listener, as well as talking to them and not at them.

A plentiful, varied supply of books.
INTRODUCTION – HYACINTHS FOR THE SOUL
HELEN PHEBY

YSP began in 1977 as an exhibition of sculpture in the grounds of Bretton Hall College, a pioneering arts teacher training college founded by Alec Clegg, Chief Education Officer for the West Riding, with the belief that a creative approach to learning helps people to realise their full potential. This approach is not simply learning how to draw, paint or sculpt – it is to nurture a way of thinking and doing, which is fundamental to being human, enabling problem solving and innovation.

YSP remains committed to sharing and testing the continued relevance of Bretton’s educational ethos, including caring for and activating the National Arts Education Archive (NAEA), a significant national resource established in 1987 to promote the development of creative teaching and learning for future enquiry. It offers infinite scope for researchers and artists and we are delighted to be able to realise Ruth Ewan’s brilliant project Asking Out all these years after she first visited in 2010, and at a time that feels more vital than ever.

Through recreating a space of progressive educational experiment from nearby Castleford, Ewan encourages us to not only engage with different ways of learning, but consider how a child’s education and opportunities are determined by their circumstances and how this plays out in their place in society.

Although now defined as an area of high deprivation, Castleford has a rich cultural and industrial heritage and is the birthplace of Henry Moore. The project invites us to question and consider whether a child born in the town today could succeed as an artist given the current education system and creative opportunities.

I would like to thank Dr Lottie Hoare for her insightful text and all the YSP staff and volunteers who care so much about what we do and why we do it, especially Deputy Curator Damon Jackson-Waldock who characteristically took this project under his wing and nurtured it to its full potential.

Many thanks are given to Kay Greenlees, who meticulously catalogues and cares for the children’s beautiful works in the Muriel Pyrah Collection in the NAEA. The project has hugely benefited from the voices of Pyrah’s former pupils and those that knew her, enabling a genuine and realistic balance to the collection. Thank you to Alison Drake, Dave Wilders, Gary Hyde, Dot Else, Hazel Parkes, Joyce Morgan and Anne Wilkins for sharing their time and school-day memories with such generosity and candour.

We are hugely grateful to Ruth for her patience and investment in bringing this idea to fruition and for her commitment and integrity to create an artwork of relevance and significance.

The exhibition is dedicated to Alison Drake, a community leader and champion in Castleford who changed lives. Including mine. YSP owes a huge debt to her for the fifteen-year collaboration we enjoyed and without her knowledge, time and passion, projects such as Asking Out would not have been possible.
In 2010 I visited the National Arts Education Archive (NAEA) at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP). The archivists Anna Bowman and Leonard Bartle gave me a tour of the collection and were keen to show me materials relating to a local teacher, Mrs Pyrah. In the early 1970s a primary class at Airedale School, Castleford, West Riding made national news when they achieved exceptionally high academic results. It appears that this was the effect of the radical teaching methodology of Muriel Pyrah, an untrained teacher. Teaching for 42 years, her methods went on to be studied internationally by many educationalists.

At the NAEA I browsed through archive boxes of children’s artwork; dozens of folded sugar paper nature diaries caked in chalky daubs of paint, meticulously embroidered swatches of fabric depicting peacocks and cats, delicate feathery pencil drawings of found natural materials. It was beautiful to see such care taken both in the artwork itself but moreover in the way it had been hosted in the archive, when we so often have a tendency not to place value on children’s art. The work of the NAEA invites us to consider children as artists, and it is one of the rare examples of an archive to host children’s output.

I’ve handled thousands of artworks by young people, as an art student I worked each summer processing secondary school art submissions for the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Teenage angst-ridden self-portraits mixed with paintings of pop stars, next to hundreds of drawings of red peppers, wine bottles and sheep’s skulls. Handling Mrs Pyrah’s classes work reminded me of this time, but yet it was notably different from a collection of classwork I’d seen before – more so considering the work was produced by younger pupils. It showed intense restraint and meticulous observational detail. Everything depicted was either from the natural world, history or science.
I am impressed with the fact that the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can see, to see clearly is poetry, philosophy, or religion.

Ralph W. Emerson.

I have never let schooling interfere with my education. Mark Twain.

I believe in the discipline of silence and could talk for hours about it (Shaw).

Most important.

...to build confidence by making sure that every child succeeds in something, also it is of vital importance that they should all learn to see the other person's point of view and care enough about others to offer help where it is most needed.
During my time at the SQA, when marking the artwork had finished for the year, I would be transferred to the main building where hundreds of thousands of scripts were stored. I pushed a trolley around filling these scripts, coming back in from markers, each in large brown envelopes marked with handwritten numbers. I had to check if the envelopes contained all the scripts they were supposed to. I’d try to get the trolley containing the English ‘personal experience’ essays and I would – if I could get away with it – sneak into a quiet corner to read the papers. Mrs Pyrah’s pupils’ texts were different again. In the children’s art and written work there is a marked absence of fantasy – no made up stories, abstract shapes, monsters or princesses – imagination is grounded in facts and figures, the language is precise, and the vocabulary is vast.

At the archive I read through some of Pyrah’s own notes. I liked her clarity and her unlikely autonomous streak. Leonard showed me two VHS cassettes on an old veneered TV on wheels, just like the one we used to watch BBC schools programmes on in the 1980s. I loved that Pyrah took the kids out so much, out of school, into nature, on trips to see other cities – the thick Castleford accents of the children as they whooshed along the Thames on their London visit. The boldness with which the boys questioned the host of the Cutty Sark. I was impressed at how the children never interrupt each other when talking – the level of self-discipline. They correct each other, they criticise each other’s work in a constructive way – it’s like a well-functioning art school for eleven year olds.

We live in a world which is growing ever more dangerously materialistic and the education we provide, instead of moderating this materialism, tends to increase it. We are caring more and more for the mind rather than the spirit which we have hitherto so often neglected in our public system.

As an artist I’m very lucky to be invited to explore new places. I begin new projects by thinking about contexts and the dominant narratives presented within those places. Around this time, I was thinking a lot about who we choose to remember, who we choose to celebrate, venerate, memorialise and the people, especially the women, we choose to overlook. In Scotland, as I was growing up, there was an advertising campaign to recruit the then low levels of graduates going into teaching. The strapline was ‘No one forgets a good teacher’. But it seems the cultural memory does forget a good teacher. We don’t really celebrate them, but looking back to our early years, teachers are probably the most impressive figures on our outlook and formation.

Pyrah also appealed to me as an outsider, an untrained teacher bringing creative and experimental forms of teaching into play, to my mind she was an educational maverick. How interesting it could be to bring this to life in the form of a classroom.
The image of Pyrah and her pupils on the boat trip, the idea of taking kids out of the classroom is something I try to do in all educational projects I’ve worked on. I’ve worked on walking projects with young people where I realised they’re not familiar with the concept of ‘a walk’. In 2012, I was able to take a large group of kids on the Thames, Londoners this time – many of whom had never seen the Thames before, let alone been on a boat.

In 2018, Helen Pheby, the curator who had originally invited me to visit the NAEA, asked if I would be interested in revisiting the recreation of Mrs Pyrah’s classroom. Was I still interested in her? I revisited the box of material I had kept from my trip to the archive and watched the 1972 documentary film One Teachers Way. Yes, I was still interested, and more so than before. Her ideas seemed more relevant than ever – children’s nature study at a time when the Lost Words project is so pertinent*, alongside the ever-important concept of ‘Asking Out’, children being encouraged to have self-determination, speak out, and articulate themselves and their ideas.

Helen introduced me to former pupils who offer deeper, unexpected and somewhat difficult insights into the class and its dynamic. I met Alison Drake and Dave Wilders who describe the profound effect she has on them, both in positive and negative ways. Dave, a practicing artist, takes away a deep love of learning, art, and nature, but he sees others around him struggle with

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* In his book Landmarks Robert MacFarlane notes the Oxford Junior Dictionary introduced new words such as interdependent, broadband and celebrity whilst culling nature words such as blackberry, crocus and lark. Concerned by this cultural shift he and illustrator Jackie Morris conceived The Lost Words, a ‘spell book’ they hoped might close the gap between childhood and nature in Britain.
the pressure of ‘Asking Out’. Alison describes a more complicated picture of Mrs Pyrah, a physical bully, a teacher who was prepared to pinch, prod and shame in order to get the results she required. It seems Pyrah ruled by such fear her students were scared to ask for a new piece of thread to carry on sewing or to tell her when they had hurt themselves for fear of retribution. One pupil I speak with recalls ‘a magical day’, on a school trip, Pyrah stopped the bus so the class could observe a cow giving birth in a field. The same class visited London to interview Barbara Hepworth during her 1968 Tate retrospective. The same pupil recalls being thumped on the back for speaking in Yorkshire dialect and not ‘proper’ English. Other students, such as Anne Wilkins, credit her with their lifelong love of reading. Others suggest perhaps she was responsible for personal low self-esteem, still staying playing out nearly fifty years later. The pupils I’ve spoken with all agree she had her ‘favourites’. It seems the girls had a harder time than the boys, and in the recorded footage, the boys speak out more than the girls.

So perhaps Mrs Pyrah was not quite the brilliant teacher I wanted her to be. Joyce Morgan, school secretary for 27 years recalls Pyrah as an ‘aloof person’ who didn’t socialise with the other teachers, choosing to have coffee privately in her husband’s office, avoiding the staffroom at all costs. Joyce’s office was next door to Pyrah’s class and she could hear constant conversation.
‘they discussed what was going on in the world, they never stuck to a timetable’.

Many factors are at play here in the telling of her story, including the wider educational context of West Riding and the pressures of the then political situation in the UK education system. I’m hugely grateful to Dr Lottie Hoare, Teaching Associate at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge for her insight into this period of history, the political context offered by her commissioned text alongside her valuable support, enthusiasm and humour throughout this project. Alongside Pyrah’s former pupils and colleagues, the archivists and volunteers, the YSP curatorial, technical and learning staff, many people have generously given time, thought and energy to make this project happen.

Perhaps by focusing on Mrs Pyrah, we can look at this ‘golden’ era of UK arts education surrounding her, and begin to see the value of the impact of creative education. Listening to local people such as Alison, Dave and Anne, who grew up in Castleford, talk of the educational spirit of the town, contrasted with the brutal economic backdrop; they articulate precisely why access to free creative education and libraries is vital. Children have to learn, in Paulo Friere’s words, how to ‘deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world’. If we can’t ‘Ask Out’ critically and creatively within our society, then how can we begin to change it?

As I write this, a wave of grass roots school strikes across the world merges into the orchestrated mass protest movement of Extinction Rebellion, both embracing science, the natural world and the young voice. Young people really are ‘Asking Out’, the next question is who is going to listen?
Children talk themselves into a zest for living

In this, the third in an occasional series of articles in which our Education Correspondent looks inside some of Britain's schools, he describes a remarkable experiment in the West Riding of Yorkshire in teaching children to use speech.

Muriel Pyrah: "If I'm working in the garden and some of the men who used to be in my class come walking up the hill, they straighten themselves up and put their shoulders back before they get up to me."

Doing what came naturally

Muriel Pyrah began teaching at 19 and never went to college. Yet her home-grown education philosophy has become a model of primary practice.

Susan Thomas reports

NON-STOP VARIETY WITH SELF-TAUGHT JUNIOR CLASS

11 year-olds show sixth-form poise

By J. M. Hargrave

"How many adults could define OSMORHA, DIGITALIS, MASTINGOLE? These were among dozens of words inscribed on the blackboard.

When a word is found which no-one in the class can define (which did not happen whilst I was there), the definition is announced to the class and then the abridged version and you would enjoy it more."

Mr. Milsupen Easy.

(Marryat can hardly be described as 'easy' for 9-11-year-olds) is another book which improves as you go on."

When a discussion is voted on (decisions from those who arise spontaneously, perhaps "I like for money" be suggested. A chairman is proposed.

just better. the question is settled by vote, and without pause the talk continues at normal speed.

By suggesting "Newspapers" I got:

"They should be smaller."

"The leaves should be stapled; they flop all over the place."

"I disapprove; one of the handy things about a newspaper is that you can split it up and the whole family can share."

"They are rather dear at 4d, but you find a lot of interesting facts in them."
From October 2016 I was employed for 13 months as a researcher on a project called *Sir Alec Clegg Revisited* based at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. I recognised the importance of Alec Clegg (1909–1986), who was the Chief Education Officer (CEO) for the West Riding of Yorkshire from 1945 to 1974. Clegg had dedicated his career to promoting arts education in dance, movement, music and the visual arts in Local Education Authority (LEA) non-fee paying schools in predominantly working class communities. However, I had written in my job application that I wanted to explore the work of teachers in the West Riding of Yorkshire, rather than focusing on educational administration. Once appointed I wondered how I reached the stories of those teachers.

I contacted Peter Newsam, CEO for the Inner London Education Authority from 1975 to 1981 and an admirer of Clegg. I had only met Peter once before but I knew from that chance encounter that he was a wise source of outspoken advice. We met up for the second time on a cold, dark, winter’s day in the archives at the Institute of Education, University College, London. Peter was wearing a beautifully tailored overcoat, an emblem of the great and the good and a lop-sided fluffy woollen hat, which marked him out as someone who thought outside the conventions of the great and the good. He composed his face with a look of determination and intense seriousness and said ‘Look at the work of the teacher Muriel Pyrah. There is material at the National Arts Education Archive (NAEA) at Yorkshire Sculpture Park’. A few weeks later I was watching documentary film footage of Mrs Pyrah’s classes at the NAEA in West Bretton and listening to the fragmented and edited voices of her pupils from 1972. The archivist, Anna Bowman, always ready to make connections between researchers and the wealth of memories in the local community, smiled at my concentration and said ‘I could introduce you to those children, the adults they became, and they could tell you what it was like when no one was filming.’

Anna’s introductions initiated some of the most helpful and frank oral history work I have ever embarked upon. Before sharing part of a transcript I need to explain more about Pyrah and the context she was working in. She was born Muriel Graham in Yorkshire, the daughter of a nursery gardener. She attended Pontefract High School and subsequently worked as an untrained teacher in a range of subjects in schools within the Pontefract and Castleford area. Her family refused to allow her to attend university. She had no training in the arts and movement education that Clegg himself had championed at the nearby Bretton Hall Teacher Training College, which he set up in 1949. She married Clifford Pyrah, who was a qualified teacher. She joined Airedale Primary School staff from 1953 and Clifford became Head in 1960. The couple had no children of their own and her sister was Head of the Infant School at Airedale. This was a close-knit educational community and an area where many families stayed in the neighbourhood for generations. Clifford taught all the maths using
conventional methods for Muriel’s classes. Maths did not involve ‘Asking Out’. Some pupils found this a relief.

Working as an unqualified teacher was not unusual in the postwar years. There were emergency training schemes brought in to train teachers as the school leaving age was being raised. Mass secondary education, free at the point of delivery, was only introduced in England and Wales from 1944, and there were consistent teacher shortages. There was no National Curriculum up until 1988. Content taught, within a given school, was developed by individual teachers. In the 1960s and 70s, Clegg was particularly concerned about inequality in education and how children living with socio-economic deprivation could access further education and professional careers longer term. The Black Papers were being published from the late 1960s onwards, ridiculing progressive education as the work of ‘unshaven’ ‘half-shod’ ‘intellectual beach-combers’ in search of ‘shapeless’ freedoms. More alarming were the questions asked about whether progressive education was most favouring the middle-class child and not encouraging what we now call social mobility for the disadvantaged. Basil Bernstein’s *Class, Codes and Control* was published in 1971, intensifying educationalists’ interest in the extent to which teachers could intervene and nurture the language patterns of children within school, to enhance their educational achievement.

The term ‘oracy’ is usually attributed to the researcher and educator Andrew Wilkinson, who in 1965 coined the phrase to define the ability to sharpen ones understanding through the use of spoken language. Wilkinson, and other colleagues associated with the London Association of Teachers of English (LATE), observed the significance of using speech to order experience and learn from it. Oracy was associated with non-authoritarian listening and speaking, and small group contexts were commended. Pyrah developed her ‘Asking Out’ technique without having connections with the oracy movement in the 1960s and insisted that her pupils ‘Asked Out’ to a whole class of more than 30, not the small groups usually recommended. It was Clegg and his colleagues who spotted the potentially useful publicity around Pyrah’s work and promoted her as someone in the right place at the right time to serve their defence of a rather particular adaptation of the progressive tradition, in the final years of both Clegg and Pyrah’s careers.

Pyrah did not encourage her class to read contemporary poetry or children’s fiction published in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Oracy usually had the intention to open the doors to creative playful language, but she often shut that playfulness down. She sometimes curbed the creative use of language in her pupils and shunned wordplay. When a pupil referred to insects ‘clustered in a web’ she wanted the wording changed to the scientifically precise ‘caught in a web’. She left some former pupils haunted by the snubs of a teacher chasing them to perform a certain kind of confidence, which was rooted in respectability rather than inner self-discipline and creativity. When it came to the long-term impact of Pyrah’s teaching of the arts in a practical sense, making things with our hands rather than ‘Asking Out’, the lasting influence was arguably more hopeful.
The last words should go to Dave Wilders, a former pupil of Mrs Pyrah who I interviewed in 2017. This is his monologue with a small interruption from me:

**DAVE** Because I did art there [with Muriel Pyrah at Airedale School in 1972] I chose to do art at secondary school. You know when you can choose or drop subjects at school, I kept art on. I got O-level Art at school. I also did engineer drawing at school. When you leave school at 16 you only have a few weeks to get a job. Where I lived, art was not really on your wavelength. I didn’t know anyone who went to college and there were not many university chances, for people like us. I had to better myself by getting a trade. I became a mining craft apprentice. The best education is a mining education because they sent you to college. I went to college for the next 5 years and it didn’t involve art but everything to do with mining engineering and technology and mathematics. When I was 21 I married Julie. I worked shifts as a young man at the pit, days, afternoons and nights and I thought about going to art evening class. In those days – they have all gone now – the art classes were run by the council education department, they were just amateur art groups in a school building or village halls. I enquired to join, but being a tight Yorkshire man I would have only got to one class out of three, that was on the day shift, I would miss the next classes when I was on the afternoon and night shifts, so I didn’t do it. I tried simple drawing at home by myself but I could not go no further with it really until my accident.

I had an accident in 1986. I was discharged as a paraplegic. I purchased and adapted a car and returned to the hospital for recreational purposes because it was somewhere to go and I didn’t know where I belonged. You were not in an able-bodied world no more; you were in a disabled world.

At Pinderfields Hospital they did an art class on the spinal injuries ward. A lady came in one day a week to teach art to the patients. She was freelance; she would also teach in prisons. In a space at the
end of a primitive Edwardian ward, where with just a curtain, a bed, a curtain, a bed, rows and rows, the art class was run. I attended because I wanted to rekindle my interest in art. I didn’t know what paper or materials to use as I had never bought any as an adult. I didn’t know about watercolours and as a miner, a working miner, if you had those tendencies you wouldn’t say it anyway, because I was at the coalface, the hard gritty life, you could play rugby, football and keep pigeons and dogs but you would never say ‘I am going to art class’ – you would get ribbed. You didn’t tell them anything. Not anything about your life. Otherwise they ripped you to bits. For good or bad.

So I joined the art class and was introduced to pencils and different papers and I did a few little still lifes and copied from books but it was limited to where we were on the ward really. I must have attended for a good couple of months and then it got a bit tedious and I thought I have got to do something else now. I felt I had to move on. I enrolled for an evening class, in town, but when I turned up I couldn’t get in. Access was through two small doors and I could not get my wheelchair through. I had to wait for the janitor to lift me up the step. I couldn’t turn up on my own. Items were brought in and we did still lifes, you also learned a lot from the other people, asking ‘where did you get that pastel paper from and the pastels and chalks?’ Your vocabulary of materials gets bigger with the introduction of new materials. There was some direction. But then I had to move on again as we were doing the same things over and over. I applied to Wakefield College to do a course in oil painting and when I got there there was no disabled access. It was barriers again. The week after they made a temporary ramp for me. These were things that were big in my life back in the 80s… access. You couldn’t just turn up and do things off the speck.

So I did the course for a year at Wakefield College in oil painting and then you are thinking what do I do next. Do I go to university or do a Foundation course? But I didn’t think it was for me really, it was a lot to take on with my wife and a little baby. So I didn’t go. I always wanted to go. I often thought could I hack it? Because you don’t know what you are capable of doing or who your contemporaries are. You only know what you are doing in your own classes. So I went back to evening classes again for a few years and then about 1990, I met up with Harry Malkin again, he was involved with an organisation I didn’t know existed, Yorkshire Art Circus. They were community artists who took community art work to the next level. They were offered an empty old Victorian school in Glass Houghton, Castleford. It was a
massive school building, they had the run of it and could do anything they wanted. Harry was an ex-miner; I had worked with Harry on the coalface. Now he had become a self-taught artist. He hadn’t gone to university, he was just a talented artist, and he didn’t know where to go neither really but he taught classes and he had gone self-employed when he left the coal industry. There was loads of funding then for the arts so he had a budget. We became big friends. And he mentored me. I started working in clay and polystyrene and whatever Harry wanted to do we started to do too. There were no boundaries really.

People would come from all over to give workshops at the Yorkshire Art Circus. It was there I met Stina Harris; this was another step onto my ladder. Stina had done a printmaking degree at Bradford University. She came and did lino print-making workshops, and I loved it. I moved away from painting that has got to look like a scene and I got more abstract. The mining education helped – it’s there because it’s controlling, you have to organise the process to get things in place, buy material, think how you make the plate, draw and design it. It’s about making cuts, making marks, using tools and oils and the mechanical making and manipulation of the image, no one says it is right or wrong. Each print is individual – that’s what I enjoy.

I ‘tangent’ off in so many strands. As a trustee of the Yorkshire Arts Circus I learned about being director of a company, employing people, I learned about business and how board meetings went, about literature, and book production. I also got into writing and research and I self-published books that got under the skin of my town.

LOTTIE Listening to all this, I think your determination and initiative comes partly from having had curiosity valued so much with Muriel Pyrah. Whatever situations you are in you are asking questions. You are thinking I am not getting enough from this now; I need to know more or do more. For all the good and the bad and the complicated there is something really important about opening the door and allowing for that kind of questioning.

DAVE You look at it different from me; I just get on with it. You interpret. If I had stopped at the mine there would have been a big void of nothing. There wasn’t time then. I had skills to manage people underground but then I came to use them in a boardroom or on a committee and to bring art to communities. I am not academic with lots of letters after-my-names. I am analytic. I think about the consequences of things. That is what I bring to the table.
I was in Mrs Pyrah’s class for four years - from 1967 to 71. I transferred to middle school at age 12. I was the first year of comprehensive education. Both of my older sisters were in her class before me.

We spent a lot of time out of the classroom. Sometimes it was just a walk to the local woods or to the museum at Castleford Library or the local flour mill, or a sweet factory in Pontefract, and Pontefract castle etc. Other times it was to Bretton Hall to work with students, or to visit a school in North Yorkshire that we were paired with where there were lots of sheep, and to York and the Castle Museum. Then every year we spent four days visiting somewhere special. I remember being in a boat going over to the Farne Islands and staying in a lovely hotel in Bamburgh or Seahouses. Mrs Pyrah was ill one day so we spent the day running round the hotel! We went to London and I think to Edinburgh. I’m not sure how the day trips were paid for as our families had very little money. My dad was a miner and mum was a barmaid/cleaner so there wasn’t any spare money. For the four-day trips we spent the year selling orange juice to the rest of the school, baking cakes and having table top sales (I’ve still got a lovely book with illustrations by Arthur Rackham, which originally belonged to Mrs Pyrah, that I bought when I was 10. The more money we each raised, the less our parents had to pay. One year I raised all of it.

The classroom was a very ordered, quiet place and we were generally very well behaved. If we said, or did something that she didn’t like, she would dig her knuckles into your back. I’m not sure if you are aware that she chose the pupils in her class. We were the brightest of the working class children and then there were the children of the more affluent. If she saw potential in a pupil in another class, she would have them moved into hers. This happened to my friend Shaun, who was particularly good at art - she saw something he’d done and he was moved to her class.

I can’t remember too much about any particular lesson, but I think that we did a lot of self-directed tasks (lots based around art and nature and our first-hand experience through visits). We sat at our desks or easels and we had to talk. Someone would talk about a book they’d read, or something they’d heard. Or she, Mrs Pyrah would introduce a topic and then we had to give our opinions and discuss. We weren’t allowed to use slang or dialect words (is that a
thing! We had to speak properly. This helped to alienate us from the rest of the school. They were already resentful as we had everything. There was no shortage of art materials, embroidery materials, books. We were encouraged to read and would have competitions to see who could read the most. I could read 2 or 3 books a day - and they were often classics.

Whilst we were in her class I remember that we moved into what had been the library, so it was two rooms with a step in between them. I know that there were floor to ceiling curtains and carpets in at least one half. I also remember that we had a ‘word wall’, so if we found a new or interesting word in our studies we wrote it up there and the rest of the class could ask what it meant and you had to be able to explain it and put it in a sentence.

We always had lots of visitors. Richard Whiteley, who later presented Countdown, he was on the local news and was always in filming us. Fyfe Robinson and Bernard Braden from Braden’s Week filmed us too. I remember I had to say what I understood by the word ‘posh’! Then of course there was Sir Alec Clegg who was always popping in or bringing people into the class. Mrs Pyrah told a friend and I to make his lunch and she bought the ingredients for a hotpot. We made it like our mother would have, but she was very angry as it wasn’t good enough, so she did it herself!

I’m told by a very old friend who was not in her class that the rest of the school hated us - and I can see why. I should imagine that the staff felt the same too. Her husband was the Headteacher and this must have been why so much money went into the class and why she could have her pick of the pupils.

I’m not sure if being in her class had any impact on my life, other than I was allowed to be me! But without a broad Yorkshire accent! I was judged to be ‘more able’ before entering her class. My father was a miner for 48 years and that was all he knew, but my mother was very intelligent and had very high expectations for us. I went to University and I think I might have been the first one to do so from the people we knew, but I think that would have happened anyway. It would be interesting to find out what happened to the pupils who were in her class. I was a teacher for 30 years - probably because they were the only female professionals I knew. It would never have crossed my mind to think that I could have been a doctor or a solicitor etc.

I think that I enjoyed being in her class, but I didn’t like her. She certainly divides opinion.
CATKINS FOREVER

Ruth meets former pupils of Mrs Pyrah: Dave Wilders, Gary Hyde and Alison Drake, also a former Castleford Headteacher; Dot Else, teacher and former colleague of Pyrah’s; Hazel Parkes, former Castleford teacher and parent of a student of Mrs Pyrah; Kay Greenlees, NAEA archive volunteer; and Damon Jackson-Waldock, YSP Deputy Curator, February 2019.

RUTH I first began researching in the National Arts Education Archive at YSP around 9 years ago, as I’ve made a few projects connected to alternative education models. In 2018 I was invited back to revisit my research around the Castleford teacher, Muriel Pyrah. I was particularly interested in two of her ideas; firstly, learning to look closely at nature and secondly ‘Asking Out’ – and what that could mean today, asking children to speak up, to ask questions of what’s around them, especially those in a working-class community such as Castleford. What’s been really interesting is speaking directly to those who knew Mrs Pyrah and comparing their stories with the ‘official story’. What I’m interested in is hearing from you about your experiences, what the positives were and the negatives, and everything in between. I don’t want you to hold back – and in the spirit of ‘Asking Out’ I’d like you raise questions and ideas about the project and the shape it may take.

Dot, can we start with you. Can you tell us about how you came to know Mrs Pyrah?

DOT I got a job as a teacher at Airedale School in 1949. Mrs Pyrah wasn’t on the staff originally. I stayed there for 37 years and got to know her as she was interested in nature, and so was I. We got on very well and because she lived near school we used to have lunch together. We’d walk across the field to her house and get back for 1.30pm. It all changed when her husband became Headteacher. It eventually worked out that people came to see her teach her pupils in the classroom. There was this ‘thing about talking’. You would hear pupils say things like ‘I’ve finished my picture what do you think about it’ and they would say ‘I think you’ve got such and such wrong’. But we just got on with what we were doing in our classrooms. Sometimes you went in and there would be microphones hanging from her ceiling. The visitors used to take her pupils’ work away, so they must’ve been impressed.

I used to take country dancing and there were some children I hadn’t seen come to the class in a while, so I asked them why they hadn’t been attending. They said ‘Oh Mrs Pyrah said we aren’t to come and do dancing if we are to pass the eleven plus!’ There were little things like that. Mr Pyrah asked me why I didn’t ask Mrs Pyrah’s class to join in with the dancing and I said she wouldn’t let them take part. I said ‘I’m not going to come down the corridor and tell you what your wife’s doing’. He said ‘I’ll ask her to be a bit more friendly!’.
RUTH Did you remain friends with her?

DOT No, she didn’t come in the staffroom. I just got on with what I was doing.

RUTH Dot, you said you were also interested in exploring nature in your class, could you speak a bit about that?

DOT We’d look at owl pellets, we had an incubator and we hatched eggs. I had a small mammal trap and out by the greenhouse we caught a short-tailed vole. We had an aquarium in the classroom ready, so we took it back into the class. The creature was all frightened curled up in the corner. The children wanted to keep it but I said no it’s a wild creature, so we put it out again. We caught the same one again and it was much happier when it came back in!

ALISON Tell her about the nature table.

DOT Oh, we always had a nature table in the class. Everybody had a nature table then!

ALISON As a pupil at Airedale I remember it was exciting when we came into your class, we all wanted to see if there was anything new on the table. You taught me how to look, really look. Because I don’t see detail, that’s not my character. That’s how I found a double-headed daisy and I was so proud! One lad who was very keen on nature brought in a dead mole.

RUTH Dot, how did you become interested in nature?

DOT I suppose being a child, in those days you just went out to play. No screens to look at. We’d play with the neighbour’s dogs. We had a canary and then a budgie. My dad was on the railway at Normanton. We lived in a row of railway houses, and right there was allotment gardens, streams, and ponds.

RUTH Hazel, can I ask you about your connection to Airedale School?

HAZEL Mrs Pyrah used to pick her students. She picked my daughter and was her teacher for three years. My daughter says it was the worst three years of her life. They didn’t do any sports. I said to her ‘what did you do at school today?’ She said ‘we stood up and said things’ so I asked ‘what did you say?’ ‘I said coming to school this morning I saw a wonderful cobweb with all the dew on it’. ‘I said and did you?’ She said ‘no I didn’t I was just expected to say something but I said a lie cause you had to say something!’ Mrs Pyrah used to pick on the poorer children and thump them on the back. They had to criticise each other’s work. There was this one girl who always criticised my daughter’s spelling and she hated it. She didn’t want to go to grammar school, she went to technical college and used to play ‘hooky’ all the time. She says she hated school. She wanted to be a lawyer but Mrs Pyrah put her off for good and she thought she was a bully. The knuckle in the back. Mrs Pyrah was only interested in the ones who could be high flyers.

RUTH Were there any aspects of the class your daughter enjoyed? Did she go on trips?

HAZEL They did go on lots of trips. They went to Northumbria, and to London. It wasn’t the sort of education my daughter needed. It was a new revival wasn’t it. Mrs Pyrah was very keen on art and sewing. When I was at school we didn’t do a lot of art, and you didn’t stand up and speak unless you were spoken to (and the cane was on the door). I got caned because I couldn’t do my sums. You just kept a low profile. It changed after the war when we started speaking out.

DOT I once took my pupils on a trip pond dipping. There were no trips when I was at school.

HAZEL I paint and we both go to art class. Just before I was 80 I went and did an art and design class and got a merit, but it was hard work!
ALISON Everybody loved you Dot because you loved us. You were strict without being a bully. Unfortunately, Mrs Pyrah was a bully. When I myself became a Headteacher, Hazel came to teach for me. She was brilliant but she’d given up teaching early as she hated the paperwork.

HAZEL I knew my children and I knew what they could do. In a way I wanted to teach like Mrs Pyrah did. That was the way to teach children’s interest. I didn’t want to teach science and stuff. Mrs Pyrah came when the change began. But the National Curriculum ruined teacher and pupil relationships, especially in infant schools.

ALISON When you went into Hazel’s school she did amazing displays to teach with. Hazel taught reception, so she had to teach the basics. I said ‘I’ll do your paperwork – you just teach’. That meant a good teacher could carry on teaching. I could do that because I was a Headteacher in a small village school.

What Pyrah did, as well as Alec Clegg and other schools around West Riding, was an experiment and it worked. And thank God it happened! It wasn’t just Airedale, but lots of schools in the area. They spread the word on how education could be done. A lot of the other teachers went on to be Heads, we had this hothouse in the region creating this kind of education. It’s vital you tell that story, it’s so important.

A lot of drawing ability from children was done by these teachers. I’m 9th of 10 kids. We had nothing. Once I remember a teacher in infant school throwing me across the class. I’d been off because I didn’t have any shoes, but I wouldn’t say. If you didn’t have teachers like Dot to encourage and accept you, you couldn’t bring out the ability. There is some fantastic artwork made by her students, Pyrah was able to draw that creativity out of people.

DAVE I’m 1 of 7 children. Where I grew up, this school was the centre of our universe really – coal mining estates, council estates, private estates… it was always classed as underprivileged, but it wasn’t. We loved school. Alison said we were cherry-picked by Mrs Pyrah, but we weren’t. In her final year of teaching, we moved up as a full class of 34. She must’ve kept a lot of our work as it was her last year. The year before, we all dreaded going into Pyrah’s class. But you couldn’t say no. It was tough really. You had all sorts of abilities in the class and some people made it and others didn’t. Some pupils really excelled. I got into the groove and I loved it. I liked the art side of it. Looking back now we were the end of her experiment – we got so much attention. Every week there was a film crew coming into school. There were visitors coming in all the time as well. The film of when we went to London that was the pinnacle of her work. I did enjoy school. We were just kids, we had nothing
but we weren’t underprivileged. All the fun’s gone out of teaching now. But then we were active – it wasn’t just rote learning like today.

DAMON You are all talking a lot about the creative side in class – did you study maths or science?

DAVE It must’ve happened but I can’t really remember it. Mr Pyrah taught us maths.

GARY History, geography, it all became part of the lesson. It was integrated. It came quite naturally.

RUTH When the film crews came into the class, do you remember if you were briefed on what to say?

GARY No, there was never a brief.

RUTH What’s interesting looking at the film footage is that when the children do stand up to speak they annunciate so clearly and confidently, but something about it feels stilted and forced.

GARY There was maybe an occasion when they would ask us to repeat something if they didn’t catch it first time around.

DAVE You brought your own information with you. She wouldn’t teach us it. We taught ourselves and each other. We were popping up like rabbits all the time, and analysed what each other said.

GARY She would sometimes say ‘OK as a group go and learn about this’. So each group would learn about different subjects. Then she’d ask us to stand up and explain what we’d learnt to the other groups.

DAVE If someone was quiet she would include them and ask them what they thought about something. She would prompt people. It happened all day long – no one could be quiet in the class.

RUTH Anne Wilkins, a former pupil, said to me she was inspired to read the classic books under Mrs Pyrah. She said she was often reading up to 10 books a week and there was a sense of healthy competition between the pupils.

GARY I can’t remember thinking of it in that way, but I do remember competitions in the class. Mrs Pyrah was my all-time favourite teacher. I remember she asked two pupils to represent the school at the RAC car rally in York. We had to put forward a proposal. We had to stand facing the class at 11 years old and say why you should go. I read forever. My mum would ask me why I wasn’t out playing with the other kids, I was inside reading. I still love reading now.

DAVE Books like *Born Free*, *Tarka the Otter*, and *Sir Francis Chichester*. I was just a kid off a council estate, but I had a fantastic library at the top of my street – it was a lovely library. Some of us joined the ornithology club. We paid 20p. She encouraged us to know all the British birds. She did push us to read more. We did silent reading a lot in class.

Student painting from the Muriel Pyrah Collection, NAEA
**RUTH** Did you ever get to see the footage the film crews made?

**DAVE** No we didn’t.

**GARY** I remember being told we wouldn’t get to see it.

**DAVE** When she died there was the collection on show at the NAEA. I found this VHS tape and I discovered all this other stuff there.

**RUTH** Gary, what do you feel you have taken with you from being in the class?

**GARY** Well from an artistic point of view nothing – I’m rubbish at that! I really couldn’t do drawing. But she made me feel confident in myself. She gave me the ability to stand up in front of people. I went on to do that all through secondary school. You go into it dreading it – Mrs Pyrah’s class. A Marmite situation, you love it or hate it. I’ve seen people since who say they hated it. I didn’t. I stayed behind to help out, put things away, help out. She’d say ‘Gary can you close the windows?’ That sort of thing. Gary being Gary jumped on the desk but I bust my leg open! I didn’t dare tell her what had happened. I still have the scar on my shin. I was too frightened to tell her.

**DAVE** It’s hard to describe that persona. There wasn’t a lot of love there.

**RUTH** Was there much praise?

**DAVE** Yes she did give praise.

**GARY** The ones who didn’t like it were those who just wanted to be left alone.

**RUTH** You mention the vocal confidence – do you think that was because you were being forced to do it?

**GARY** I remember doing some sewing of a rocket. I remember asking ‘what can I do to make this better?’

‘Asking Out’ showed me how to accept criticism as normal. You wanted to be criticised to make things better. It gets into your system – people can be critical without being malicious or nasty – they are just trying to help.

**RUTH** That’s really interesting. In that spirit, is there anything we can add to this project to make it better?

**DAVE** Well, I’ve been thinking and might it seem quite stale looking at the classroom from the 1970s – people might think ‘What’s it got to do with me?’ If you can get them there! You’ve got to interact with them, give them some tasks to do. Every child used to put a new word on the blackboard every week.

**GARY** Can you ask people to put words up on the blackboard? How do you spell it? What does it mean? In what context do we use it? That kind of thing…

**RUTH** Would she write the words, or the students?

**GARY** I think she wrote them up but you had to spell it.

**RUTH** Just going back to what you were saying about why would someone be interested. They may not be from West Yorkshire. They may be from another country even. I’m hoping we can create an installation with sensory elements that encourages people to reflect on their own educational background. It’s going to appear nostalgic for some people. I think nostalgia is a powerful force to use as it can draw people in, and then you can pose questions and show the value of what was being done in this experiment. I want to show some archive material too and there is a question of why that is interesting. I hope people view it not just in a passive way, but really engage with the idea of ‘Asking Out’, and the value it could have today.

**DAVE** You could let people use the desks for activities.

**RUTH** Yes, and we want people to bring things they find from across the Park and bring them to the gallery.
HAZEL: I have Mrs Pyrah’s old desk, they were auctioning off the furniture from the school and I bought it, you can borrow that.

KAY: Did you bring the nature objects into the classroom yourselves?

DAVE: Every object was something we had brought in. Teasel, there was teasel everywhere! Catkins. Catkins forever! Do you know what I mean? Bullrushes!

KAY: The stitchings of animals and the drawings that are in the NAEA are incredible for their observational details. Did you draw them from books, or directly from nature?

DAVE: We went on a lot of visits. We looked at things close up. We took a lot of notes.

KAY: I catalogued the Muriel Pyrah Collection in the NAEA. The level of observation in the artwork is just fantastic. You can see the difference between a blackbird and a chuff for example.

DAVE: Did they ever cut up toads Dot?

DOT: We had toads in the classroom, but not to cut them up!

DOT: We got a toad and some beetles and watched the toad [sticks out her tongue and mimics a toad]. Well, it chuffed me more than it chuffed the children!

ALISON: You also let us hatch chickens, Dot!

RUTH: Can you remember anything else about Mrs Pyrah?

DAVE: She would inspect us now and again. Our shoes. Our teeth. Hair, I mean there was lice passed around a lot. They used to line us all up. She gave instructions on how to clean our teeth. We didn’t all have toothpaste so we were told how to brush our teeth with soot from the fire.

ALISON: Castleford is the sort of place, if you live around the area, people say it’s a real dump. But it’s not – it’s a gem of a place! If you get into the history. It’s no coincidence that Henry Moore came from that town. It was a wild-west boomtown 110 years ago when they started the grammar school. It went on through the generations – really good quality innovative education. What happened in the 50s and 60s was a roll through of the ‘Toddy’ Dawes era. Hazel was a hand-painter in the potteries. The town was full of creative people, working in those industries. My brother was a Lecturer in mining engineering and he ran the pits. He said ‘we never had one unskilled person in the pits, it was too dangerous!’ It was a skilled, demanding, job. Henry Moore and his dad weren’t unusual in Castleford. This was an example of being self-taught. Education was a way of life. I remember chalking on the floor to learn long division and my dad said to us the only way out of poverty is education. And I loved it.
I went on to be a teacher because I wanted to give that to my pupils, just like Hazel and Dot did. It wasn’t a dumb head place where folk just worked in factories and mines – it was full of creative, innovative people. It was alive with great education. But I’m sick of people looking back and thinking this is a post-industrial town with nothing. It’s the lack of jobs and it’s the lack of purpose in life that’s gone wrong. We didn’t just lose the industries, we lost a way of life! It makes me sad.

GARY From the outside looking in, it wasn’t as bad as it was being made out, windows smashed and all that.

RUTH Something I’m keen to acknowledge is how dated the style of news reporting is, the nature of what is said is patronising and quite insulting in many ways...

ALISON But we were in the vanguard of many things. Before WWI, in 1904 ‘Toddy’ Dawes paired with us with a German exchange town to show our culture, and to discourage warmongering. He was a Head in a mining town and he did innovative things in Castleford. Not just education, but we also did kinds of creative stuff in our mines and also in our culture. Henry Moore is just an example. He had all these influences. People here had this enthusiasm for learning.

A lot of what we had around the classrooms was locally produced: Hartleys pottery, bulb bowls, jugs with flowers in, all Castleford pottery, and there is plenty still about. Dave knows all about it, he published a book about it.
DAVE You should have a table in the classroom with found nature objects on there. We grew cress on cotton wool.

ALISON Yes. Grow cress! Different teachers had their own strengths. Dot took us dancing. Bessie Buller was so good at creating dance she shared it with other teachers.

DAVE You should invite twelve-year-olds in to the installation, it could be interesting to compare with today’s classrooms. They have bottles of water in school now! Stress toys!

ALISON Can I say Alec Clegg had schools built, fabulous, before that they built proper drinking fountains. The importance of water, clean water, isn’t new. When Alec Clegg built these schools there were fountains for kids to drink. Why have they got water on every table now? They don’t need it every 5 minutes! It’s indulgence to me.

DAVE Why’ve they got stress toys?

HAZEL Stress toys!

RUTH Stress toys and bottled water, I think that says a lot about our times doesn’t it. Thank you so much everyone for sharing your memories and ideas today, this has really contributed a lot to the project.
VOCABULARY TEST

NAME ..........................................................

DATE OF BIRTH .............................................

SCHOOL ................................................................

NUMBER OF BOOKS READ BETWEEN 1st SEPTEMBER, 1967
and 30th JUNE, 1968 ........................................... 

PARENTS' OCCUPATION ........................................

1. orange ...................................................... 24. lotus ......................................................
2. envelope .................................................... 25. bewail ....................................................
3. straw ........................................................ 26. repose ...................................................
4. puddle ....................................................... 27. mosaic ....................................................
5. tap .............................................................. 28. flaunt ....................................................
6. gown ........................................................ 29. philanthropy ...........................................
7. eyelash ....................................................... 30. ochre .....................................................
8. roar ............................................................ 31. frustrate ............................................... 
9. scorch ....................................................... 32. incrustation ..............................................
10. muzzle ...................................................... 33. milksop ...................................................
11. haste ........................................................ 34. harpy .....................................................
12. lecture .................................................... 35. ambergris ............................................... 
13. Mars ........................................................ 36. piscatorial .............................................
14. skill .......................................................... 37. depredation .............................................
15. juggler ..................................................... 38. perfunctory .............................................
16. brunette .................................................. 39. limpet ....................................................
17. peculiarity ............................................... 40. achromatic .............................................
18. priceless .................................................. 41. casuistry ............................................... 
19. regard ...................................................... 42. homunculus ...........................................
20. disproportionate ....................................... 43. sudorific ............................................... 
21. shred ........................................................ 44. retroactive .............................................
22. tolerate ................................................... 45. parterre .................................................
23. stave ....................................................... .................................................................

SCORE ........................................................