

NEW/ADVENTURES

**MATTHEW BOURNE'S
SWAN LAKE
CURTAIN RAISER:
THE TRANSFORMATIVE
POWER OF PERFORMANCE**



Canterbury
Christ Church
University



Sidney De Haan
RESEARCH CENTRE FOR
ARTS AND HEALTH

In May 2025, the *Cygnet School* dancers stepped onto one of the UK's most prestigious stages at *The Marlowe Theatre* in Canterbury, as young dance artists.

Performing to a full house of 1,200, the cygnets opened a matinée of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* with a curtain raiser, that was as bold and moving as the iconic production that followed.

This was the culmination of months of creative exploration, technical training, and personal growth, through *New Adventures Cygnet School*, a pre-vocational dance programme designed to nurture the next generation of artists.

**“Before we go on,
we remind each
other we’ve got
this. It helps to
feel we’re doing
it together.”**

Celebrating its 30th anniversary, *Swan Lake* remains a landmark in *New Adventures* repertory. Bourne's radical reimagining of the ballet, with its all-male swan ensemble and themes of identity, vulnerability, and transformation, continues to inspire audiences and dancers alike.

The *Cygnet School* curtain raiser paid homage to this legacy, while forging its own path. The themes of identity, vulnerability and transformation, mirror and resonate with the cygnets, as they are adolescent young dancers and transforming as young dance artists.



A curtain raiser, a short, original work, was crafted in collaboration with the *Cygnets School* artistic team. This opportunity to rehearse and perform on a professional stage, before the main *Swan Lake* cast, was a transformative experience, that ignited greater confidence, creativity, and a profound sense of belonging for the cygnets.

Under the guidance of the *Cygnets School* artistic team: Glenn Graham, Sophia Hurdley, and Isaac Bowry, the cygnets created a response piece that drew on swan motifs, repertory, and formations. They explored entrances and exits, flocking and connection, and importantly, how to develop their expression and performance skills, to engage with the audience with presence and purpose.



During the year from October 2024 to May 2025, **Professor Angela Pickard** observed and worked with the cygnets each month, to explore how they sustained motivation, towards the curtain raiser performance, and how the model for cygnet centred talent development was applied in the context of preparing for performance.

“Even when I’m tired, I remember why I’m doing this, it is what I love!”

“Rehearsals can be hard, but I like the feeling when everything finally clicks, and we all look strong, that’s what keeps me going.”

The cygnets engaged in monthly reflection activities, including post-it responses, posters, mood charts, discussions and a lotus fold memory book. They shared how they managed and regulated their focus, energy levels and emotions, supported each other, gained self-confidence and a stronger identity, and maintained a sense of purpose.

“If I get bored of doing the same bit over and over, I try to find something new in it, a different way to show emotion or connect to the music.”

A Model for Cygnet-Centred Talent Development

At the heart of the Cygnet School is a pedagogical model developed by **Professor Angela Pickard**: the 10 C Talent Development Framework. The model is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), which identifies 'A, B, C': Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence, as essential components for motivation and wellbeing.

These components were not abstract ideals, they were lived experiences for the cygnets, as they worked together to create their response piece.

▲ **Autonomy**

The cygnets had opportunities to be decision-makers in their creative journey, shaping some choreography, and exploring their identity through movement. This freedom to create, cultivated confidence, ownership, and independent thinking.

“Creating dance lets me say things I can’t explain in words.”

“We make our character our own”

▲ Belonging

The cygnets built meaningful connections with each other, the artistic team, dance as an art-form, and they worked together as a company. The performance experience reinforced a shared sense of purpose and trust, fostering joy, community, connection, and pride

“It helps when we laugh together. The group gives me a boost when I’m low on energy.”

“We were all a bit nervous in the tech rehearsal, but that felt like we’d bonded because we all cared about showing our best and supported each other through. Knowing we were all there for each other made a difference.”

“We’ve become like a team. We all want each other to do well, and that feels amazing.”

“Even when I don’t feel great, I come because the group lifts me up. I feel like I belong here”

▲ Competence (achievement)

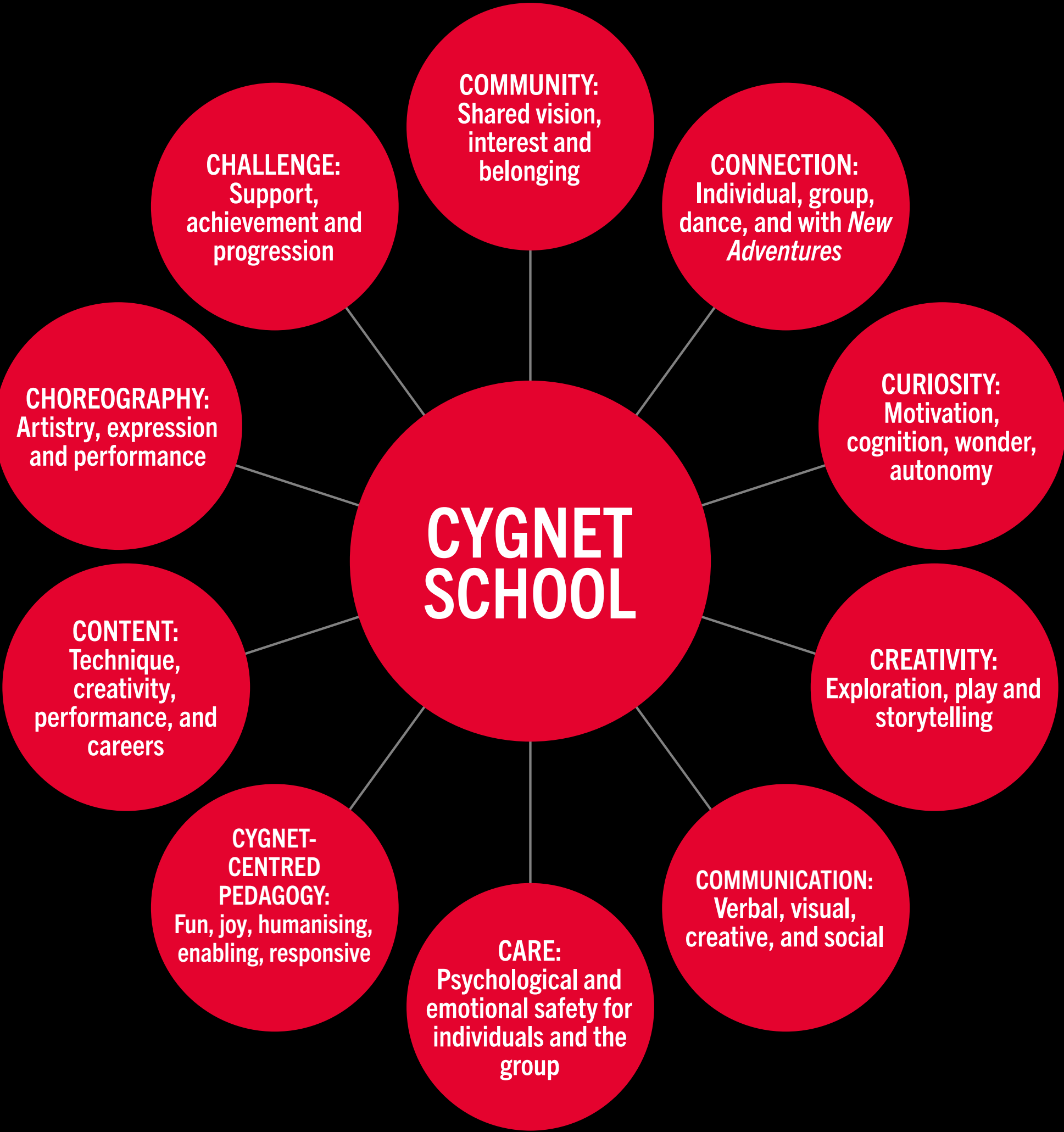
Through focused creative exploration, storytelling and expression, the cygnets experienced progression, mastery, and celebration. Performing to a live audience validated their growth, skill, and expressive power.

**“I use my nerves, it means I care.
I’ve learned to turn it into energy”**

**“At the start I wasn’t sure I could do it,
but now I feel confident. I’ve learned that
I’m stronger than I thought.”**

The 10 C Model of Cygnet School in Action

From *Challenge* and *Creativity* to *Care* and *Connection*, the programme developed the cygnets artistically, emotionally, and socially.



Challenge

Progression through dance material, rehearsal and performance

Community

Peer support, trust and bonding

Connection

To self, each other, dance, and *New Adventures*

Curiosity

Exploration of repertory, creativity and storytelling

Creativity

Developing original movement as an artistic response

Communication

Expressing ideas through movement/dance and dialogue

Care

Emphasis on emotional safety and wellbeing

Cygnets-Centred Pedagogy

Joyful, enabling, and responsive teaching

Content

Technique, performance, and career awareness

Choreography

Artistry and expressive creation from concept to stage

In a world where young people often feel unheard or unseen, the stage becomes a place of visibility, agency and transformation.

The curtain raiser performance shows that when young people, are given the tools, trust, and time, they can create work that is powerful, relevant, and deeply moving. Beyond the individual, the curtain raiser experience demonstrated the power of performance.

Contact

Contact Angela.pickard@canterbury.ac.uk for more information about the Cygnet School evaluation.

Reference

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2012). Motivation, personality, and development within embedded social contexts: An overview of self-determination theory. In R. M. Ryan (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of human motivation* (pp. 85-107). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

