

Building Bridges — Making Links:

Bradford's Linking School's Project, 2001— 2004

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Background

The City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council is the fourth largest metropolitan authority in the country and consists of small villages and thriving market towns as well as an inner-city with extreme social disadvantage. The population is diverse with approximately sixty five per cent of primary school pupils being white European, twenty eight per cent Pakistani, two per cent Bangladeshi, two per cent Indian, one per cent African Caribbean and two per cent 'other'. In spite of this overall diversity, settlement trends mean that many schools have populations which are almost entirely white or entirely Asian. With a few notable exceptions, this 'ghettoisation' of housing and schools means that many pupils can spend their entire school lives mixing mainly with one sector of the wider community that makes up the city.

The riots during the summer of 2001 and the events of September 11 in the same year threw the city's divisions into sharp focus. Many schools felt ill-equipped to deal with the tensions, (which are now re-surfacing as a result of the current situation in the middle-east). There was an imperative to act. The Ousley report, published just before the riots, made strong recommendations for education in the city to try to address the simmering tensions created by division in the schools.

A related concern in education in Bradford is the underachievement and disaffection of certain sectors of the population, particularly Pakistani boys and pupils from poorer English backgrounds. Strong differences start to show at Key Stage 2 and 3 between the performance of these groups and the population as a whole. Related to

this is an increase in emotional and behavioural difficulties experienced by pupils, even the very young. School staff struggle to manage these difficulties. They often lead to disruption for other pupils and certainly affect staff morale.

Introduction

The idea of a Primary Schools Linking Project was developed in the autumn of 2001 when a member of the Education Bradford literacy team visited Eldwick Primary, a Beacon school. Observation of a session of circle time and drama, which was being used very successfully to raise standards in speaking, listening and writing, immediately highlighted the potential for sharing this practice with other schools.

At the same time Girlington Primary, another Beacon school, was interested in developing its work on speaking and listening. In addition, the recent disturbances had led to strong feelings about community cohesion in both schools. Despite both being in the Bradford district, the two schools have very different populations: Eldwick has a semi-rural setting, with almost all of the children learning in their first language, English. Girlington is situated in the inner city. Most pupils are learning English as an additional language and have a South-East Asian heritage. Both schools have a strong commitment to school improvement and have additional strengths in the area of communication, both within school and the wider community.

A meeting between the two head teachers ensured that the project would go ahead, and it was decided that a class of Year 6 pupils from each

school would participate. Three important factors were agreed:

1. The first meeting place was to be a neutral venue.
2. In line with the inclusive nature of each school, whole classes would take part that is sixty pupils across the two schools. This meant that children who were hearing impaired, autistic and visually impaired as well as those with behavioural difficulties, were included.
3. There was to be a clear curricular focus. This was to become a strength of the project, as it gave the pupils a purpose and a focus, leading to more substantial and sustainable relationships.

The first meeting

The first meeting took place in January 2002, at Cartwright Hall, a purpose-built Art Gallery, set in the middle of Lister Park in the Manningham area of Bradford. The gallery seemed an obvious choice as it has a transcultural collection and a supportive education team, who felt that this project lifted well within their overall ethos.

The main aim of this first meeting was for the children to get to know each other and to engage in the agreed focus, which included Year 6 objectives for Religious Education and literacy. The meeting was arranged for the afternoon, but it soon became apparent that this was too short a time and that the next meeting would need to be longer.

One of the teachers recorded her first impressions in this way:

Sixty nervous children eyed each other cautiously across the expanse of the education room at the gallery, and when asked to sit in a large circle, as expected, we had a semi-circle of Eldwick pupils and a semi-circle of Girdlington pupils. Janice Kershaw, deputy head of Eldwick immediately began a series of circle games, with the aim of mixing the children. They were asked to change places if they liked pizza. The room was soon full of

children changing places if they liked football, fish and chips, East Enders

The children then chose a partner from their own class, and joined with a pair from the other class. Groups of around twenty were quickly put together, and the children were taken on a tour of the gallery. This included focussing on various pieces of artwork using drama and art in ways related to the curricular themes. Finally, all pupils created their own visual images and these were combined to make a large artwork, consisting of sixty individual pieces. This has become a symbol of the union between the two groups of pupils.

The second meeting

This meeting was planned for a whole day and again took place at Cartwright Hall. After the very popular and successful circle games undertaken as a whole group, pupils formed mixed groups and rotated through three activities planned and led by teachers:

- RE: Pupils were asked to work with a partner from the other school in order to produce an image that would be suitable to place on the door of a multi-faith prayer room. This led to discussion and explanation of children's own faiths and religious beliefs and acknowledgement of the need for respect for the equivalent status of different religions.
- Art: Again working in pairs, pupils discussed their personal likes and dislikes. They produced personalised bookmarks with symbols resulting from their discussions.
- Drama: Pupils worked on developing drama based around two paintings on the themes of growing up, change and making choices.

The third and fourth meetings

involved split class visits to both schools, and took place in two consecutive weeks. The aims were to build on work begun at Cartwright Hall within the children's normal class contexts and for pupils to spend a

typical school day together, including assemblies, playtimes and lunchtime. Both classes continued their art, drama, RE and literacy work to produce an article on why other classes should work together in this way, what had been learned and how the ideas could be shared with others. It was during these two meetings that firm friendships were made.

Further developments

The project began to gain recognition within the

Bradford area, and there were several additional meetings. These included:

- A drama presentation based on a painting called 'The Emigrant Ship' as part of the launch of Education Bradford at Valley Parade in March 2002.
- Pupils were filmed for 'Look North' and a local magazine programme 'Close Up North'. These broadcasts coincided with the first anniversary of the riots, and presented a very positive image of community relations.
- A group of pupils was asked to speak to a Home Office representative about the project. All of the adults present at this meeting were impressed by the maturity and the sincerity of the pupils when discussing their twinning experiences.
- In July 2002, pupils performed a tableau at the Bishop of Bradford's celebration day, to commemorate progress in community relations in the year since the riots. This was reported as follows in the local newspaper:

'A group of pupils from two primary schools reduced many of the guests at the conference to tears with their message of friendship across different cultures. Children from B Primary School - mainly white — and from Girdlington Primary — mainly Pakistani Muslims — gave an emotional and sincere performance of their twinning programme, Building Bridges, Making Links.'

The pupils, who stood apart on the stage at first, showed how they initially felt shy, embarrassed and worried about each other

Then they began to talk about shared interests — such as pizza and East Enders — and began to become friends. The children pretended to walk across a bridge bringing positive things to the other group. They included hope for a better future, different cultures, happy memories, understanding, a new friend and a handshake.'

Outcomes

- By experiencing normal curriculum focussed activities that they could share, pupils found it very easy to mix and work together.
- By using simple but focussed drama techniques and creative arts activities all pupils were able to participate, feel included and express themselves.

By responding to clear and powerful stimuli, pupils were empowered to find ways of tackling difficult issues.

Next steps

The pilot project between these two schools was undoubtedly a success, and all involved were keen for it to be extended. Bradford Vision allocated Neighbourhood Renewal Funds to support a total of forty schools over the next two years in developing regular and sustained links.

In September 2002, primary and special schools from across the authority were invited to apply to be part of the project. There was a very good response, and Key Stage 2 classes from eighteen primary and two special schools were linked with guidance from Education Bradford. It was decided to work with pupils before Year 6 to allow time for development of relationships over a longer period.

An initial training day was planned and carried out in October 2002, and advisers met with each pair of

teachers to help produce a detailed plan of the

year, using the model of the pilot and an outline of six inter-school meetings.

Meetings between schools were planned to take place between January and July 2003, and at the time of writing, all pairs have had at least two, with positive feedback from nearly all concerned. Comments from pupils, such as: 'If more people did this we wouldn't have riots.' And 'I've never met a Christian before. I thought they wouldn't like me.' remind us continually how important it is to work through the commonly perceived barriers, how children are far more open than adults often realise and how much we all have to learn.

Pairs of schools are adapting the original model, including PSHCE and geography as well as art and drama, but always adhering to the central principles of inclusion, clear curricular foci and planned techniques for enabling mixing and communication. Although no two pairs are following identical programmes, each is following the model of initial meetings at a neutral venue and subsequent split class visits to the participating schools.

Next steps

- In the summer term of 2003, it is intended that schools will hold open assemblies, for parents and governors.
- A celebration event is planned for July 2003, to include all six hundred and ninety pupils currently involved in the project!
- The first twenty schools will make plans to continue and extend their work next year.
- The next twenty schools will be linked and preparing for their work together next year.
- All schools involved will be invited to participate in a cultural diversity family learning weekend in the autumn at

Cartwright Hall (using additional funding)

- When forty primary schools have firm links we hope that linking schools will be seen as the norm. It is also intended that the programme will be extended to secondary schools, involving feeder schools and transition issues and materials.

Lessons learned and the way ahead

While every attempt has been made to follow the principles outlined above, the reality is that principles are always open to interpretation. In addition, the larger the project becomes, the less easy it is to support in a close and tightly monitored way. Therefore, while we are excited, moved and often delighted by the work of the project, we are also cautious and have moments of anxiety. There have been difficulties both in terms of practicalities, for example transport, timings and planning meetings, and more crucially at the level of the emotional engagement of all concerned.

In Bradford, where racial divisions are many people's everyday experience, coming together raises issues and feelings for which some people are unprepared. Developing a supportive network of teachers has been a crucial factor in allowing everyone to explore these issues and to learn to deal with difficulties if they arise in school. The important thing is that everyone involved in this work is totally committed to contributing to a more socially cohesive future in the District. Also the project will need to move outwards from its school-centred origins to include the wider community, if the project is to make a strong and lasting impact.

It is important that as well as our own critical evaluation of the Schools Linking Project, some form of external evaluation also takes place, before we can claim any firm achievements from this work. Meanwhile, we are cautiously optimistic and continue to

be amazed at the wisdom of the children involved in the project.

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