

The Schools Linking Project 2006

It seems hardly possible that four years have passed since the inception of Bradford's Schools Linking Project. What started with an exciting meeting in Jan 2002 between two Year 6 classes from Eldwick (90+% white British) and Girdlington (90+% Pakistani) primary schools, has grown into a district-wide initiative. The powerful drama led by Eldwick Deputy Head Janice Kershaw, gave the sixty children a strong tool with which to explain and articulate their understandings of their commonalities and differences. These young students, poised to move onto their secondary schools, were clear that building a link between their primary schools, at a time where fear and suspicion of people from different ethnic, cultural or religious backgrounds was very common, was the best thing that could have happened to them. It dispelled myths and fears, created friendships and a sense of unity and shared belonging to the diverse district of Bradford.

The schools linking model has developed and grown and attracted attention both locally and nationally. The importance of this work was brought home for all of us once again as the last event of the school year 04-05, was hosted at Eldwick, on 07/07/2005. The bitter irony of this was inescapable and the final two weeks of the school year became a period of intense soul searching for the whole district.

The fact that there were no repercussions in Bradford to the events of 7/7 and the subsequent awful revelation that the bombers had been local, can be attributed to much hard work by so many people, determined to show that strength and unity prevailed over fear and knee jerk reactions. We would like to think that the work of the Schools Linking Project over the previous three years have played some small part in this, but our work is far from over.

An external evaluation was commissioned in the third year of the project, to determine whether the impacts of the Schools Linking Project were significant and sustainable and therefore whether it would become part of the Council and Education Bradford's core business. This report (now available on www.schoolslinkingproject.org) provides a detailed analysis of the impacts of the work and the project team are already addressing many of the lessons of this study. The most important message from the report is that when linking is done well, it can have astounding results, with

children breaking barriers and showing mature understanding of the issues. On the strength of this evidence the project, which is developing into a district-wide strategy is now being mainstreamed.

The Schools Linking Project is moving towards a consistent model with regular professional development days for key staff, meetings with Head Teachers, a clear outline of activities and guidelines for how to run successful linking days, as well as programmes of work for times in between meetings. These are slotted into PHSE/ Citizenship themes for which there are now detailed plans and resources. A DVD of good practice is also underway in 2006.

New developments this year include:

- Keighley Schools Linking Project, working with all Y5 pupils from 15 primary schools and a group of Y12 students from the 3 local secondary schools
- Secondary schools' linking and cohesion work in drama, music, work with University of Bradford Peace Studies and Nobel Laureates through an American organisation called Peacejam, as well as RE, History and Archaeology projects.

Taking note of one of the report's recommendations, new work is also beginning with schools where the populations is already diverse, or is rapidly changing.

This year also we are exploring links with other contexts, both locally across the north of England and further afield in Northern Ireland, where there are many new immigrants – a previously unknown phenomenon in Ireland. We have been privileged to be invited there to share our work and we are learning much from their wealth of understanding of the complexities of identity and conflict resolution.

European links are also opening up. We have been approached by fifteen countries so far who are keen to work with us in citizenship issues. We will be exploring the possibilities offered by these links over the coming months and intend to support schools that are keen to link with other countries, using the same principles as our project so that we all gain and learn from each other.

We welcomed the British Council education representative from Islamabad this month and many schools have subsequently expressed interest in linking with a school in Pakistan, particularly after the earthquake, many Bradford schools are contributing to rebuilding schools in Pakistan. This is very exciting and will hopefully lead to sustained links between schools once they are established.

Finally, I am going to leave the project in the capable hands of my colleagues for three weeks in March to travel to Israel and Palestine, to speak at a conference on 'Creativity in Conflict' and to visit much good work that is going on there to shape a more peaceful and productive future generation. I am looking forward to what I suspect will be a fascinating and humbling experience.

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