

PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND COHESION THROUGH LINKING SCHOOLS

Since 2001, the Schools Linking Project has been working in many primary schools in Bradford. The aims are to establish positive and sustainable relationships between pupils who attend schools in different parts of the district, so that pupils from diverse backgrounds have opportunities to meet and explore their commonalities and differences. It is hoped that, by addressing issues of social diversity and cohesion in this way, we will be equipping young people to become skilled 'intercultural navigators' and ambassadors for a more peaceful, productive and cohesive community.

An important factor that the linking project addresses is where there may be just one child of a different ethnic background to that of his or her classmates. If such a class meets with a class from a school where the majority of the children are from different backgrounds, this can be a very positive factor in the 'isolated' child's learning experience.

Linking schools has advantages for all children through enabling them to meet and mix in 'normal' circumstances, doing what they would do every day. Spending a school day together incorporates a range of formal and informal activities, and allows for a broad range of communication skills to be encouraged and developed. This is an important aspect of the work and has a positive impact on achievement as well as social cohesion. Careful planning and preparation based upon a clear understanding of the teaching and learning of communication skills is crucial.

Through linking, pupils of all ethnic backgrounds have the opportunity to explore the curriculum from different cultural perspectives. For example, studying the Second World War in the Schools Linking Project has become an exciting opportunity to interview older people, not only from a pupil's own community, but also from other communities in the city. This opens up exciting and meaningful possibilities for genuine enquiry and builds pupils' confidence in purposeful language use. It is particularly interesting to see pupils whose first and only language is English grow in admiration and respect for their peers who are able to translate the older people's stories, which are often told in other languages.

An additional advantage of links between schools with ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse populations is that staff can develop new skills by working alongside one another and with different pupils. This was something we noticed very early on in the project. It is not always a comfortable experience, but - like all real learning - it is extremely worthwhile.

This work, by its nature, throws the school ethos into sharp relief. Where a school is welcoming and has a strong and positive relationship with the community it serves, everyone has a stake and an interest in the linking work and it comes more easily to all involved. Classes hold assemblies to share the work they have done with their link school, parents get involved and children feel positive and secure about making new relationships. Through involvement in the project, some schools become aware that there is work to do in developing their own ethos, and support is available for this to happen.

How the project works

There are five key factors in the organization and development of the Schools Linking Project:

- Central coordination
- Partnership working between teachers and creative sector workers.
- Training and support for teachers and schools
- Financial support
- Internal and external evaluation.

Central coordination is important, particularly in a district as large and diverse as Bradford. It allows for key messages to be disseminated and shared, for a pool of supportive creative workers to be linked to schools and for training and support materials to be developed. Crucially, it also provides a steer and a listening ear when schools need support.

We discovered that the most powerful tool for learning and teaching across the curriculum in a culturally diverse and challenging way was to use creativity. For example:

- Drama can facilitate work on immigration
- Art can provide a way of expressing relationships and understanding experience.
- Dance and other physical activity can develop new skills and teamwork.

We discovered also that this does not come naturally in all classrooms - *good* partnership working requires thought, planning and training. Central to all of this is the emphasis on communication, at three levels:

- Between the children
- Between the adults
- Between the adults and the children.

The creative activities facilitate this communication, first by providing a stimulus that is not necessarily language-based but requires a linguistic response and secondly because it helps everyone to find ways of expressing and developing affective and not only cognitive responses.

Training days have been developed incorporating themes such as the use of cultural venues and working collaboratively with a range of different practitioners, as well as addressing organizational and practical issues and issues of race and cultural awareness. Feedback from teachers has led us to see that this support is essential. Training days also provide important opportunities for the teachers to network and learn from each other. Further training is also offered to whole schools on any issues that have been raised for them by participating in the project.

The following two brief case studies provide a snapshot of the project in operation.

Case Study: The Schools Linking Project in Primary Schools G and E

These two schools were pioneers of the Schools Linking Project in 2001-2, carrying out drama and art activities at Cartwright Hall, one of Bradford's main cultural venues. The project has grown from the model developed organically with them. "

School G is an inner city primary, with approximately 98% pupils of Pakistani heritage. Many start school with English as an additional language. The school is a beacon school for inclusion; a resourced school for hearing impaired pupils and has an impressive achievement record, particularly in KS 1. It was in the pursuit of continuing this through KS 2 that, in 2001, when the project started, innovative language work was being explored.

School E is a suburban school, with the majority of its pupils of white British backgrounds. Also a beacon school and with consistently high achievement, one of its major strengths is in the use of drama across the curriculum, particularly to promote high attainment through writing.

These two schools came together to explore what they had to offer each other, in terms of learning and teaching communication skills and of building positive and sustainable relationships between their communities at a time when this seemed both difficult and crucial for the wider Bradford community.

All the adults involved were apprehensive and yet hopeful about this work. But no one was prepared for how eagerly the children grasped the opportunity and how clearly they expressed their views. No-one told the children directly about the aims of the project. But after a few meetings, they knew. They told us that everyone should be doing this, so that 'we won't have riots any more in our city'. The 10-year-old boy who said this was the only minority ethnic child in the class at School E. The project enabled him to speak out and show us as adults that we have to have the courage of our convictions. The teachers realized that working with the link school had given him the opportunity to explore and articulate his feelings of isolation in a constructive way.

The following year, the two schools spent their first day together at an outdoor activity centre to develop trust and confidence. The teachers followed this up by reflecting with the children what it was that made that day so successful in terms of relationship building and task completion. The children were able to explore the themes of collaboration and cooperation and then test their hypotheses by inventing, designing, making and playing board games in pairs the next time they met their link class.

These two schools have gone from strength to strength in their relationship. Each year, one year group is chosen to be involved and a160 pupils in the year group are included, even if they have additional educational, physical or emotional needs. In fact, the emphasis on inclusion has been strength in this link; some children at School E have been inspired to learn sign language to make sure that they can communicate with the hearing-impaired children at School

G. One boy at School E, who is autistic and found the linking experience difficult at first, excelled in learning sign language and looked forward to subsequent meetings with great enthusiasm.

Case Study: The Schools Linking Project in Primary Schools Band S

These two schools have linked for two years and are also very committed to linking as one of a range of strategies in both schools to combat racism and to raise awareness of cultural diversity.

School B is in an area of the city that is unusual in its diversity, so the school itself works hard to draw on its own cultural mix in a positive way. School S is in a semi-rural setting, with an all-white population, and is very keen to broaden the social experience of its pupils. Together they are developing a piece of work in RE called *Doorways*, which explores entrances to different places of worship and also leads to imaginative work, encouraging the children to articulate the way they inhabit different worlds at school, home, place of worship, sometimes other houses and even in other countries. These children have developed an extremely mature approach to issues of identity, community and racism. They can explain how they will describe themselves differently depending on the context they are in. One child wrote: *It's good to mix because when we grow up we'll be with different people all at the same time, we won't be with our religion people.*

They work with their school councils to combat racism and other bullying in their schools, bringing the Citizenship curriculum to life in their everyday practices.

Some factors common to all schools successfully involved in the linking project have been identified:

- A clear understanding from the leadership that the aims of linking are fundamental to the education of their pupils
- An awareness of the importance of linking to the extended community of the school.
- Good planning rooted in the normal curriculum and enhanced by creative aspects as appropriate.
- A belief among teachers that this is a valuable and crucial aspect of their work.

Teachers all give willingly of their time and energy and are rewarded by the heart warming moments they witness when children who would not normally meet are sitting chatting side by side while completing a task. Through their involvement, many teachers have found a renewed sense of purpose. The children often comment how happy they are to make new friends and to discover that children who they expected to be so different are not very different after all.

More details of the Schools Linking Project are available from the website, listed at the end of the chapter.

CONCLUSION

The main points covered in this chapter are summarized in the box, which provides a set of key principles for promoting a positive ethos and supporting bilingual learners in 'mainly white' schools.

Summary: Principles for promoting a positive ethos in schools

1. To succeed in school, all pupils need to feel that they belong, and that they are recognized and valued for who they are.
2. In 'mainly white' schools, bilingual pupils may feel isolated. Small actions and attention to detail can help them feel secure and that they belong.
3. Teachers can use their own personal experiences and knowledge in powerful ways to relate to their pupils and help them feel they belong in school.
4. Writing is a powerful tool to promote a positive ethos in school and to highlight pupils' own attitudes and responses to different issues.
5. There is great value in primary schools linking with each other to build positive relationships and provide pupils with first-hand experiences of diversity.

Useful websites

www.bradfordschools.net/slp

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ethnicminorities/raising_achievement/

www.naldic.org.uk