

Learning from Beyond Local Boundaries

Angie Kotler; Schools Linking Project

The main aim of the Schools Linking Project is to establish positive and sustainable relationships between pupils of different backgrounds, who live and attend schools in different parts of the district, and who otherwise might not ever meet. It is hoped that creating such relationships will have a preventative effect on the forming of prejudicial attitudes to people of different ethnic and/or religious backgrounds.

Bradford has a diverse population. However, only 25% of school pupils attend schools where there is a significant ethnic mix. A concurrent and related concern in education is the underachievement and disaffection of certain sectors of the population.

Linking schools enables children to meet and mix in 'normal' circumstances. Spending a school day together incorporates a range of formal and informal activity, allowing for a broad range of communication skills to be encouraged and developed. This is an important aspect of the work and impacts on engagement in learning and achievement as well as social cohesion.

The riots during the summer of 2001 and the events of September 11 threw the city's divisions into sharp focus. There was an imperative to act, while even before these events, the Ouseley report had made strong recommendations for education in the city to try to address the simmering tensions exacerbated by division and virtual 'apartheid' in the schools. The past year, since 7/7, has been a time of uneasy peace, with much of the Asian Muslim population feeling anxious and victimised.

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

- Central co-ordination
- Partnership working between teachers and creative sector workers
- Training and support for teachers and schools.
- Financial support
- Internal and External evaluation

Central co-ordination 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 leaning and teaching issues across the curriculum in a culturally diverse and challenging way was to use creativity, so that, for example; drama facilitates work on immigration, art can provide a way of expressing relationships and understanding experiences, dance and other physical activity develop .new skills and teamwork. We discovered also that this does not come naturally in all classrooms and that good partnership working requires thought, planning and training.

Training days have been developed to support teachers who are leading the project in their schools. They have opportunities to work on issues of identity and prejudice as well as time to plan link days with their partner.

In 2006 there are 60 linked primary schools across the district, with an additional cluster in one area and a growing number of secondary schools. An external evaluation was carried out in 2005 and the report can be found on www.bradfordschools.net/slp

The following case study provides a snapshot of the Schools Linking Project.

G Primary and E Primary were the pioneers of the Schools Linking Project in 2001-2 and it is from the model developed organically with them, with drama and art and the use of Cartwright Hall, one of the city's cultural venues at the heart of it, that the project has grown.

Girlington is an inner-city primary, with approximately 98% pupils of Pakistani heritage and many starting school with English as an additional language. The school is a resourced school for hearing impaired pupils and has an impressive achievement record.

Eldwick is a suburban school, with the majority of its pupils being of white British backgrounds. It has consistently high achievement; one of its major strengths is its use of drama across the curriculum. These two schools came together to explore what they had to offer each other, both in terms of learning and teaching communication skills and in terms of building positive and sustainable relationships between their communities, at a time when this seemed both difficult and crucial.

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. Without ever telling them why we were bringing them together to work, after a few meetings they knew and told us that everyone should be doing this, so that 'we wouldn't have riots any more in our city'. These ten-year olds showed us that we had to have the courage of our convictions and through their work were able to express this more clearly than any adult could.

We do not claim that this project has all the answers to the many challenges that we face in terms of community cohesion in Bradford. However, we can say that we have a model that seems to work in terms of starting a process and we are now trying to involve parents more and to further develop citizenship training for schools. We trust youth work practitioners and teachers across Northern Ireland will gain from learning about our work and that our approaches will be of help to their ongoing commitment to the good relations agenda within an equally divided and increasingly diverse context.

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