Bridging cultural divides

The Schools Linking Network, a new government-backed programme, provides resources, courses and advice on active citizenship for anyone interested in how school linking can deliver a greater understanding of issues of identity and diversity and can support the new duty on schools to promote community cohesion.

The programme draws on its experience of local linking in Bradford which has enabled young people from different ethnic, cultural, social and religious backgrounds to work and play together, involving approximately 100 schools per year. As a national initiative, the network now supports schools and other local authorities to establish sustainable linking programmes which meet local needs.

The programme began six years ago as the Schools Linking Project with an aim of encouraging links between primary schools with very different cultural profiles. It should be recalled that 2001 was the year of race riots in Bradford, which had highlighted the fact that young people of different cultures from different areas of the city had very little contact with each other.

‘We started with primary schools,’ says Angie Kotler, the project’s strategic manager, ‘partly because it was the area I was most familiar with and seemed more amenable to this approach. We wanted to embed the programme within the curriculum and our first emphasis was on developing higher order language skills such as discussion and debate.’

The benefits of the approach were soon apparent. Younger pupils were given the chance to express their inner feelings and fears, and with very encouraging results. ‘After 9/11, it was clear that Pakistani Muslim and British white children in particular were scared of the idea of each other,’ comments Angie. ‘But by bringing schools from the two communities together to discuss and debate their concerns, it helped to integrate school and real life experiences, build understanding, forge friendships and produce a step change in communication skills. We had 10 year-olds speaking to people from the Home Office explaining why they thought this opportunity had been so valuable.’

Initially seen as an experiment, the programme’s success led Education Bradford to embed it into the mainstream curriculum, and six years on there are now 60 primary schools taking part.

Sharing the curriculum

Taking the initiative into secondary schools was a tougher challenge, not least because it initially depended on Angie working unaided. ‘It also meant developing a different model from that used in primaries, which involved matching classes in different schools to develop a shared curriculum’, she noted. ‘We exploited opportunities through drama and music, both powerful stimuli for citizenship, and managed to get ambassadors from schools to deliver joint activities with primary schools, including joint-school council days.’

One very successful initiative was based on the involvement of various groups in the armed services during the Second World War. ‘We needed to find people in the community who could recall their wartime experiences. But as they came together for the first time – whether from a Caribbean, African,
Pakistani as well as white British heritage – there was so much learning to be had across all age groups. Many didn’t realise that Pakistan was part of Britain’s Indian Empire until 1947, and the white youngsters were full of admiration for their peers who were able to translate interviews into English.’

While the project has shown how real citizenship can be brought into the curriculum, it still needed teachers trained in citizenship to give it status and take it beyond PSHE (personal, social and health education) which is now starting to happen. Angie also acknowledges the value to the programme of the LSN post-16 citizenship resources: ‘They’re the best we’ve seen, especially the resource We all came here from somewhere, which reinforces exactly the way we work.’

Finding safe space

The techniques developed with younger pupils are proving highly appropriate to the 16+ age group. ‘Although it is early days in our programme for the older group, we’ve found the approach should be the same at all levels; it’s a matter of taking things to greater depth but still giving young people ‘safe space’ to air their concerns.’

In one school, the older students have explored the concept of “community”, working with a drama teacher who discovered that the young people were still very unsure of themselves and their own identities. The school itself is a very mixed community where there was a degree of volatility between certain groups, including refugees and migrant workers from eastern Europe. By using drama as a focus, with space for discussion, the students were able to move forward through a greater understanding of themselves and then work with younger students to help resolve tensions within the school.

‘We’ve discovered the power of drama and music as a way of exploring young people’s multiple identities and how this might relate to the idea of “Britishness”. Though a serious issue, it can also be fun to explore and has shown the need for everyone to laugh at themselves at times a bit more,’ reflects Angie.

And using music as a medium for citizenship, the students were able to hear and meet Dawud Wharnsby, a musician-cum-educator from Canada who has embraced the teachings and philosophy of The Qur’an and by combining music with discussion among young people, has promoted tolerance, diversity and social cohesion.

The Schools Linking Project has attracted the interest of both the Home Office and the DCSF whose support has given the programme a national dimension, leading to a new organisation called the Schools Linking Network. ‘We’ve been asked by the DCSF to work in two ways – with local authorities to help them create strategic linking programmes and, by expanding our team, to support a wider schools linking network,’ says Angie. ‘Through the National Gateway, schools can register with us and we can find them a partner anywhere in England.’

Though the generic principles established in Bradford are applicable to all areas, by working with different authorities and seeing how each has its own problems, the programme is benefitting from a range of experiences and is open to new ideas. Angie would like to see more young people involved with the programme, including those outside the formal education system. ‘I’d like to get mixed groups of the more privileged working with excluded youngsters on a community service project, and using school councils get young people to be involved in community concerns, where possible with parental involvement.’

Further information from Angie Kotler at angie.kotler@schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk and for more information about the national network and how to access support, visit: www.schoolslinkingnetwork.org.uk

You can see the Bradford Schools Linking Project at: www.bradfordschools.net/slp