

**Collaborative Learning
Lenzie Academy and Partnership**

CASE STUDY



East Dunbartonshire

Building Bridges in Literacy

In the Beginning

Building Bridges in literacy P6 – S2 is a national pilot project, bringing together teachers and librarians from primary and secondary years. Groups participating in the project were asked to explore a range of ways to build bridges in learning and literacy to raise and sustain achievement.

Lenzie Academy and partner primaries were delighted to be asked to be part of this national project seeing this as an opportunity to be at the forefront of important national developments in teaching and learning.

Our liaison work had for some time been focusing on sharing learning and teaching methodology, which had had a positive impact on the transition years. Building Bridges was welcomed as an opportunity to extend further our links by engaging teachers and the librarian in sharing and developing methodology that potentially would:

- enhance all learning and teaching in our schools
- would continue to raise attainment.

The Schools

Lenzie Academy is a six year comprehensive school which serves the districts of Lenzie and part of Kirkintilloch. The current roll is 1402 with a teaching staff of 100. Lenzie Academy receives a large number of placing requests from other areas of East Dunbartonshire as well as from other local authorities.

Lairdsland Primary serves a wide and varied catchment area of Kirkintilloch. The school roll is approximately 280, of which 30% are placing requests.

Lenzie Moss Primary is situated in a residential area within Lenzie. The present roll is 328.

Lenzie Primary is situated in a quiet residential area within Lenzie with a varied catchment area. The present roll is 234 (including a 30 placement nursery) of which 60% approximately are placing requests within and outwith the authority.

Millersneuk Primary School is situated in a quiet residential area within Lenzie. The present roll is 303 pupils.

The Invitation

East Dunbartonshire Education Quality and Development Service invited Lenzie Academy and Lairdsland Primary to represent the authority at the Building Bridges National Conference in June 2003.

By August 2003 a decision was taken by EQDS to extend the project to include Lenzie Academy and partnership primaries. Individual schools were asked to identify participants and this was agreed by September 2003. In line with Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) guidance the primary 6 and primary 7 teachers, an English teacher and the librarian from secondary were invited to participate. The secondary had freedom to invite a teacher from another curricular area to participate. It was felt that a teacher of Geography would widen the scope of the project.

Preparing the Ground

The group consisted of:

- East Dunbarton Education and Quality Development Officers (2)
- Senior Managers (Primary and Secondary) (5)
- P7 Teachers (3) P6 Teachers (1)
- English Teacher, the Principal Teacher of Geography and Secondary Librarian (3)

Each school undertook a literacy audit as requested by LTS and collated results, which were then passed to EQDS. All members of the group attended a LTS Area Seminar in early October. Following this each teacher undertook background reading to inform their understanding of current key education research. The seminar gave an excellent opportunity for the group to gain an in-depth awareness of the far reaching implications of the project and the valuable contribution that each member would bring. This was the first meeting of what was to become an extremely effective, committed and successful team. Lively and interesting discussion took place at the Area Seminar, stemming from the key priorities identified by the audit. Initially this indicated that writing would be the key priority. In the course of discussion, it was agreed not to make writing the key focus but instead to focus on a methodology which underpins all learning and teaching. It was felt that this would be an effective way to build bridges across the curriculum. The generic aim resulting from the audit showed willingness and need to engage in shared activities which:

- would lead to a coherent approach to learning and teaching
- make explicit links between Reading, Writing, Talking and Listening
- consider literacy across the curriculum
- make use of formative assessment strategies.

The Specific Aims of the Project

Given that a main aim of the project was to impact across all curricular areas in both primary and secondary, it was decided to investigate Talking and Listening methodologies. The group understood the importance of Talking and Listening in the learning process and believed that this focus would lend itself to an interactive approach across the curriculum and across sectors. As a result the specific aims of the group became:

- to facilitate interactive learning through talk methodologies;
- to highlight to pupils the links between learning and teaching and also between talking and learning;
- to enhance professional partnerships P6/7 to S1/S2 to ensure continuity of methodologies and experiences;
- to increase teacher understanding of learning styles and formative assessment as they relate to the use of group discussion in the classroom.

The following sources of evidence were identified:

1. pupil questionnaires undertaken pre and post pilot period
2. teacher assessment sheet
3. pupil self-evaluation forms
4. teacher log
5. record of semi-structured interviews.

In each class, a stratified pupil sample was identified. From this sample, questionnaires and pupil interview data were collected and analysed. The focus group consisted of 24 boys and 24 girls of mixed ability.

***“We should really be doing some of this in every lesson shouldn’t we?”
(secondary pupil)***

Starting Up

Primary and secondary senior managers attended the National Conference on Improving Attainment in Literacy and Numeracy in June 2003. Speakers from HMIE and the AAP Assessment Programme provided evidence of Scotland’s position on achievement in literacy within the British and International contexts. Although the message from HMIE was positive, it also contained challenges about the need to improve levels of literacy in Scottish schools. In addition, HMIE evaluated examples of teaching practices and demonstrated how the quality of interaction between pupil and teacher and also between pupil and pupil was directly linked to achievement.

As a result of attending the conference, reading recent research materials and briefing from EQDS, the group acquired an awareness of the importance of formative assessment to the project. Early in the autumn the group attended a LTS Area Seminar during which the rationale for the project was discussed, resources highlighted and insight gained on the theory underpinning the project.

The group was pleased to accept the offer of support from a Strathclyde University researcher who helped to shape thinking on the collection and analysis of data and on the need for rigorous evidence to support the project. She also helped to shape the discussion, which finally determined the areas of focus. We undertook to develop strategies to use talking and listening explicitly to demonstrate the effect of interactive collaborative learning.

“Talking and listening has improved everything across all curricular areas.”(primary teacher)

As the researcher advised a tighter focus, the research was limited to two areas.

- Does the use of group discussion enhance pupil understanding of a topic?
- Does the use of group discussion raise levels of motivation and engagement?

With the focus agreed

- The group undertook training in group discussion methodologies provided by an East Dunbartonshire Education and Quality Development Officer.
- a development plan (Appendix 1) was devised which clearly stated aims and outcomes along with the key focus of the project. The implementation and management of all aspects of the project were discussed and clearly set out in chronological order.
- the programme of school visits and attendance at conferences and meetings was planned and agreed by the primary Head Teachers and the secondary 5-14 Co-ordinator at primary/secondary liaison meetings (Appendix 2).
- funding was allocated to individual schools to cover participation in the various aspects of the project. Each school was responsible for arranging cover to release teachers from class to participate in the project.

Throughout the project, feedback given by staff enabled senior managers to evaluate and monitor progress. This allowed for fine-tuning on an ongoing basis. At each primary/secondary liaison meeting time was allocated for discussion, evaluation and monitoring of the project.

Meetings were arranged at key points with the whole group (EQDS, Senior Managers, Class Teachers and the Librarian) to share experiences, to build on inter-personal relationships and promote confidence in employing interactive learning.

***“Talking and learning together
made lessons much more
interesting and fun.
(secondary pupil)***

Inter-School and Interactive Strategies

All project team members prepared for pupil interviews and research by reading and discussing key documents.

- (1) *“Doing Your Research Project” – Judith Bell*
- (2) *“Using Semi-structured Interviews in Small Scale Research” – Eric Drever*
- (3) *“Inside the Black Box”, “Working inside the Black Box”, “Beyond the Black Box” – Paul Black & Dylan William*
- (4) *“Literacy across the Curriculum” – Department for Education and Employment.*

Each school incorporated the various group talk strategies (Appendix 3) across a series of lessons. A focus group of six pupils of mixed ability and gender was identified in each subject or school at the outset. These pupils were assessed throughout the project. Standardised assessment documentation was used to ensure rigour and consistency across all schools.

All teachers and the Librarian shared the learning intentions with their pupils. The time allocated to a task was agreed in advance and the role of the pupil within the group was identified and defined.

In primary lessons the project embraced a wide range of curricular areas. In the secondary an English class, geography class and the S2 library skills course were selected to ensure a cross-curricular approach.

“A very quiet pupil in my group came up with lots of ideas.”(primary pupil)

The following practices were common to all lessons:

- all lessons began with the aims of the lesson clearly communicated by the class teacher to pupils and any visiting teacher
- the class teacher selected the group talk strategy to be employed in a particular lesson
- the group dynamics were organised by the class teacher e.g. gender, ability, size of group
- the group talk activity had a clear and explicit outcome
- the time limit for the talk activity was set and communicated to the pupils
- the teacher’s role and (that of any visiting teacher) was clearly defined
- all teachers completed a log
- the focus group was assessed
- time was allocated immediately following each lesson for teachers to reflect on lessons with visiting colleagues.

Gathering Evidence:

The following standardised procedures were followed by each teacher:

- questionnaires(Appendix 4) were completed by pupils at the beginning of the project to provide information on pupils’ attitudes to talking and listening
- the same questionnaire was administered at the end of the project to enable evaluation of changes in pupils’ attitude
- each teacher completed a log sheet (Appendix 5) for each lesson detailing the aims of the lesson, the strategies employed and an evaluation
- teacher assessment record sheets (Appendix 6) were used by both the host teacher and the visiting teacher to assess the focus group

- pupils were asked to compile a self-assessment record (Appendix 7) for each lesson linked closely to the aims of the project. These records aimed to provide teachers with greater insight into how pupils valued talking and listening as a learning tool
- teachers shared the learning experience and discussed observations at the end of the lesson which allowed issues to be addressed and refinements made
- at the end of the project the focus pupils were interviewed (Appendix 8).

***“When you talk, you
learn more.”
(primary pupil)***

Findings

During the four months of the active implementation of the strategies for research evidence, questionnaire evidence indicates the following results:

A) Before and After Pupil Questionnaires P6-S2

- **All** boys and all girls reported that talking with others helped them to undertake a task.
- **Almost all** (96%) pupils reported that collaborative talk helped them to think about ideas to include in their answers.
- **Almost all** (98%) pupils reported that at the end of the project they liked to put forward ideas in a group.
- **Almost all** (94%) pupils reported that they felt confident giving reasons for their ideas in a group. Notably 100% of girls felt confident giving reasons for their ideas in a group. 88% of boys felt confident giving reasons for their ideas in a group.
- **Almost all** boys (96%) and almost all girls (96%) indicated that they were now willing to change their minds if people in a group gave a good reason for the argument.
- By the end of the project a **markedly significant increase** in the number of boys who felt they could listen and then respond to others was noted.

B) Selection of Comments from Pupil Interviews P6 – S2

i) Does the use of group discussion enhance pupils understanding of a topic?

- “If other people understand it they can help you.”
- “When you share ideas, it helps you to understand.”
- “It is definitely easier to do a writing task if you have discussed it first.”
- “I could expand on my answers when I heard other opinions.”
- “When you put everybody’s ideas together, it gives you a better idea than you had at the start.”
- “If you talk to others, you get to prepare your answers before you start to write them down.”
- “Talking with others helped me understand things better.”
- “Talking with others helps you prepare your ideas before you write them down.”
- “If you’ve got a really good idea, but then somebody adds to it, it can improve it.”
- “Some quiet people listened and gave a few ideas – they didn’t say much – they gave a few little precise things – they listened and then gave a good answer.”
- “When you talk, you learn more.”

ii) Does the use of group discussions raise levels of motivation and engagement?

- “Everyone was talking a lot to each other about what we had to do, most “people came up with suggestions, and everyone said they liked them or disliked them.”
- “Everyone did their fair share of the work.”
- “Everyone thought they were as special as each other.”
- “We worked hard in non-friendship groups.”
- “A very quiet pupil in my group came up with lots of ideas.”
- “Lessons were fun; I now have a lot more to say in groups.”
- “I knew if we carried on we wouldn’t be allowed to do it again”.
- “Everyone had something they were good at.”
- “Everyone got a wee say.”
- “We worked well but not noisily.”
- “Some people are quite quiet, but once they get used to it they talk a lot more.”
- “I enjoyed playing the different parts within the groups.”
- “Everyone did their fair share of the work.”
- “I enjoyed working in groups because you didn’t get nervous.”

Summary of Teacher Findings

The Pupil Experience

The project was certainly a very positive experience for all pupils. Evidence gathered from questionnaires, interviews, observations, log sheets, and pupil self-assessment, suggested that pupils learning had been enhanced and changed by the project.

Teachers and the Librarian noticed that pupils:

- enjoyed the opportunity to work with a variety of other pupils
- were motivated and enthusiastic
- felt the lessons were enjoyable (“lessons were fun” was the phrase most used by pupils)
- enjoyed the group discussion methodologies at all stages and in a wide variety of curricular areas (English, Geography in secondary, Language, Maths and Environmental Studies in primary)
- learned more about a topic by listening to the views of others
- set about writing tasks with greater confidence
- had more thoughtful and clearer ideas for writing.

“You don’t know what someone else is capable of until you start to work with them” (secondary pupil)

The Teachers’ and Librarian’s experience

- teachers extended the range of methodologies used in their Learning and Teaching and as a result changed their attitude, thinking and practice
- teachers quickly became aware that the methodologies and strategies were generic to both sectors, all stages and curricular areas

- teachers gained confidence using interactive learning activities in talking and listening across the curriculum
- teachers gained confidence in the use of formative assessment strategies
- teachers gained experience and confidence in action research
- teachers developed greater skills in analysis and evaluation techniques. They were aware of the need to be rigorous and provide evidence of changes
- the interaction between primary and secondary teachers and also among primary teachers built relationships which became the cornerstone of the project
- primary/secondary links were strengthened and became more focussed
- each member of the project group had own roles and tasks which were clearly defined and understood by the whole group, thus ensuring that group members jointly took the project forward
- positive working relationships were established with EQDS who held an overview of all aspects of the project and also helped with detailed arrangements by linking with Learning & Teaching Scotland.

“The library is no longer a silent place. It buzzes with active learning.” (librarian)

Comments from Teachers

i) Before the Project began

- “It was daunting as we didn’t know what it was all about. We were apprehensive - what was involved? We didn’t know it would be as big as this.”
- “I was quite nervous about having a subject specialist visiting the class.”
- “We were worried about where attainment evidence was coming from as the pupils were talking not always producing a written outcome.”

ii) Getting started

- “Pupils require initial training to become familiar with the strategies”.
- “When we started we already knew our classes. This made the implementation of the strategies easier.”
- “At first we didn’t know each other, but were supportive because we are doing the same thing.”

iii) By the end

- “Talking and listening has improved everything, across all curricular areas.”
- “Initially I was sceptical and worried about how to fit it all into existing lessons, but it was surprisingly easy to adapt.”
- “We gained confidence in the management of talking and listening strategies.”
- “I am now no longer worried about people observing a class lesson.”
- “I saw the importance of structured groups and structured tasks, not just having pupils sitting in groups.”

General operational comments from teachers

- Pupils were much more focused because they had ownership of their work.
- Teachers worked collaboratively in each other’s classrooms.
- Teachers listened to pupils together.
- We gained knowledge of unfamiliar strategies by observing others.
- We became aware of how different strategies developed pupils learning.
- We learned useful tips and new ideas by sharing good practice.

- Searching for information and synthesising worked well in a group as did problem solving.
- It is useful to start with pairs before moving on to more complicated strategies.
- Mixed sex grouping are important to develop a range of skills for all pupils.
- The pupils' preferred strategies were pairs, envoys and carousels.
- Pupils **must** be clear about their tasks and their role within the group before they begin. Sharing the criteria by which pupils will be assessed helps pupils to see their own progress.

***"I don't feel so shy. People listen to me now."
(primary pupil)***

Conclusion

***"When planning a lesson now I stop and think. All it takes in two minutes to turn a lesson around"
(primary teacher)***

***"It's easy to incorporate group discussion strategies once your confidence grows."
(secondary teacher)***

While teachers were initially concerned about classroom management and discipline during talk activities, in fact children reported that behaviour in groups was very good. Significantly, there was a marked increase in the percentage of boys listening to others, responding to others and giving good reason for their arguments. There was also a significant increase in the number of girls who felt more confident in putting forward ideas in a mixed sex group. A major contributing factor from the pupil's point of view is that they found the lessons fun and/or exciting. Interestingly two high attaining boys preferred to work individually but admitted that they learned more working in a group.

Without doubt, teachers sharing the learning interactions with the class, sharing the assessment criteria and showing pupils how talk strategies would positively impact on learning helped all pupils to improve the content of their work and improve their interpersonal skills.

In addition to the stated aims of the project, many other bridges were built.

The shared experience in the classrooms and the time to reflect on practice led to the establishment of a cohesive team. We planned together. We worked together. We collaborated. And as a result we learned together. Not only did the use of group discussion enhance pupil understanding of a topic and raise their levels of motivation and engagement we too, as adults, benefited from collaborative learning.

For the first time in our professional lives a partnership developed which transcended the usual boundaries of sectors, stages and curricular areas.

What next?

The cluster has already launched a "Building Bridges in French" project which mirrors the planning, structure and evaluation procedures of the original project.

The English and Geography Departments of the secondary participated in in-service on group talk methodologies in May 2004. It is anticipated that these strategies will be embedded into the work of both departments in S1 and S2 next session. Following the In-Service a policy was drafted.

In primary work has begun to extend the methodologies of group talk into other year groups and across all curricular areas.

The group delivered a presentation to the LTS Conference in June '04 and to assessment is for Learning Co-ordinators in September '04.

The group has been asked to make a presentation to East Dunbartonshire Head Teachers in 2004 – 2005.

English teachers and all primary teachers undertook EDC In-Service on the summative Assessment of Writing in August '04. In October '04 whole cluster In-Service on formative assessment will take place.

The cluster has planned a launch of formative assessment strategies for all teaching staff in both sectors for October 2004.

"Everyone thought they were as special as each other." (secondary pupil)

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