

Future Learning and Teaching Programme

Multi-Sensory Learning and Creativity

Partnership Project
between

The Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School
and
Balgreen Primary School
Edinburgh

Final Project Report



The Steiner Balgreen Future Learning and Teaching Project 2004-2005

Multi-sensory Learning and Creativity

Background to the Project

In June 2003 the Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School made contact with Balgreen Primary School in Edinburgh to propose working together on a partnership project exploring how elements of the Steiner education could be integrated within mainstream education. The then head-teacher and 5 members of staff expressed initial interest and visited the Steiner School to find out more about the Steiner curriculum and approaches. It was important that Balgreen teachers saw relevance to their own practice in the project and they were invited to suggest which areas of Steiner methodology they felt would be most useful to them. The City of Edinburgh Council Education Department was consulted and Alison Kidd, the Quality Improvement Officer, agreed to be a member of the steering group. Following a series of meetings with staff from both schools, a plan for a project focusing on multi-sensory learning and creativity was finalised and funding was secured through the Scottish Executive's Future Learning and Teaching Programme.

The project involved teachers and classes from Primary 1, Primary 2, Primary 5 and Primary 6. A grant for £15,044 was awarded for a supply of materials including beanbags, block crayons and art supplies, and to enable teachers from both schools to be freed from their classes when necessary. The grant also covered the filming of the project.

Key Aims and Objectives

The project's main aims were to explore how elements from the Steiner approach might be integrated into the mainstream curriculum and to establish a mutually supportive learning environment which would be to the benefit of both approaches.

Its objectives were to:

- integrate within the curriculum a multi-sensory approach to learning with a special emphasis on pupils' creativity.
- address and support the different learning styles and needs of pupils, including those with learning disabilities, to heighten pupils' experience of their own creativity and promote confidence, self esteem and social inclusion.
- work specifically to develop the integration of art and music within the primary curriculum together with introducing and implementing a programme of rhythmic work designed to encourage healthy physical and cognitive development in pupils of all abilities.
- support the development of emotional literacy, collaborative planning, formative assessment and the reflective practitioner.
- focus initially on pupils from stages primary 1,2,4 and 5.

Project Outcomes

The project has successfully

- established a partnership between the Edinburgh Rudolf Steiner School and Balgreen Primary School that provided a mutually supportive learning environment for teachers and pupils.
- shared best practice between two different educational approaches and provided evidence that elements of the Steiner approach can be successfully implemented within a mainstream context
- developed multi-sensory learning as an integral component in the curriculum through the introduction of a programme of rhythmic and oral literacy work.
- encouraged the integration of creativity and art in the curriculum
- increased learner achievement, attainment, confidence, emotional literacy and self-esteem
- promoted teachers' creativity and continuing professional development through collaborative working and reflective practice
- promoted the investigation of effective strategies, the sharing of learning intentions and appropriate feedback.

All of the above have helped to develop pupils' creativity and increased enjoyment of learning.

The Phases of the Project

The project was divided into three phases to take place over the period of one academic year. The first phase involved the 5 Balgreen teachers, plus the Head-teacher and her depute whenever possible, taking part in a series of 5 training afternoons at the Edinburgh Steiner School. These sessions were experiential in nature and covered the Steiner approach to painting using wet paint on wet paper – experiencing the flow and nature of colour – drawing using wax blocks and working with beanbags to develop rhythmic awareness, oral literacy skills, hand/eye coordination, an awareness of body geography, and skill in multiplication tables. Visits were also arranged when Balgreen staff could shadow Steiner teachers in their classes and reciprocal visits for Steiner staff to visit Balgreen classes also took place.

The second phase took the form of Steiner teachers presenting the above approach and skills in Balgreen classes with Balgreen teachers observing. The third phase saw the Balgreen teachers implementing the new skills and learning within their own classes, with consultation and support where appropriate from Steiner staff.

At regular intervals throughout the project, steering group meetings were held which offered an opportunity for reflective and collaborative learning and formative assessment. A meeting with the entire Balgreen teaching staff took place in February at which the project was presented and opportunities offered for other staff to experience something of the kinaesthetic and artistic work involved. This was led by one of the Steiner teachers who also explained more about the rationale behind the different approach. Other teaching staff in Balgreen were invited to join the project and four expressed interest.

As a means to further develop the partnership between the two schools, two pupil exchanges were organised. Four pupils of P7 age from each school visited the other school for three days. Pupils were encouraged to reflect upon their experience and to share feedback, both amongst themselves and jointly with staff. Furthermore, the schools have invited each other to attend plays and concerts and inter-school sports fixtures have already successfully taken place.

Evaluation of the Project

Evaluation from both schools has confirmed that the project has been successful for the following reasons:

- Over the months of the project a bond of mutual respect and colleague-ship has developed between the two schools.
- Steiner teachers have greatly appreciated the opportunity to work in a wider educational sphere and to learn more about mainstream practice.
- Balgreen teachers have developed new approaches that they have been able to make practical and meaningful use of within the curriculum.
- There has been much discussion on issues common to both schools, and where differences have been perceived, they have led to self reflection resulting either in positive changes being initiated or to the conscious affirmation of existing practice.

Because the Steiner approach is rooted in its own educational philosophy and has its own clear rationale for its approach and curriculum, a direct exchange of *curriculum* content from Balgreen to Steiner has not been appropriate. However, Steiner has widened its understanding of a mainstream approach and become aware of current educational policies. Further, the Steiner School has been motivated to set up a Pupils' Council similar to the existing successful model in Balgreen.

The Local Authority has expressed enthusiasm for the project and notes that it has been a unique opportunity for two schools with different approaches to work together. It supports the findings of the teachers (outlined below) and plans to disseminate copies of the DVD to schools in its area.

Pupils from both schools have gained from the partnership. The two exchanges have provided pupils with the opportunity to experience another school's environment and approach and to grow through the hugely important learning process of living through their initial nerves and anxieties to

become more confident and at ease in the new setting. Pupils from both schools are excited about the prospect of inter-school sports fixtures and in general appreciate the links and sharing between the two schools.

Balgreen teachers have expressed their belief that implementation of Steiner elements of creative and multi-sensory work have impacted positively on their pupils. They have noted that:

- Enthusiasm for multiplication tables and raised attainment have been observed as a result of using the multi-sensory or kinaesthetic approach. It has also been observed that this work, because it emphasises crossing the dominant line, is beneficial to pupils who have literacy and spatial difficulties as well as being relevant and fun for all pupils. Furthermore, it has been found that to do this kind of work early on in the day can energise pupils so that they are more receptive and focused for their desk work.
- The kinaesthetic work supports the school's Therapy Inclusion.
- Working in art with the wet on wet technique has resulted in pupils experiencing how to use colour in a way which allows the paint itself to play a role in determining the final result. This has involved them in a process of learning how to engage with the creative flow.
- The renewed emphasis on drawing has met with enthusiasm. Pupils have thoroughly enjoyed using the wax blocks and have learned to work with the whole page and to move from the centre out to the form rather than colouring in from an outline. The value of using colour and art in other subject such as maths has been explored with enthusiastic responses from pupils and impressive results.
- Drawing has become more strongly embedded in their classes' work with drawing jotters also being supplied for extra work. Pupils have been so enthused by their drawings that they have asked to take their books home to show their parents. One little boy who previously had been unwilling to hold a pencil was observed choosing to do a second drawing himself in his free-choice time. This suggests that the drawing work had had a significant impact on his self esteem and confidence.
- The Steiner approach to art which, at primary school age, involves children learning from the teacher's example is an effective way of encouraging children to listen actively and follow instructions.
- Telling a story as opposed to reading one from a book has an extremely powerful impact on pupils. Children were able to focus on listening for an impressively long time, to recall the story well afterwards and to use images from their imagination in their drawings. They were also enthusiastic about the language even though it was often archaic. The perceived importance of storytelling (which is daily practice in Steiner schools) was an unexpected element of the project. It led to the scheduling of a story-telling workshop with one of the Steiner teachers offering guidance in telling and selecting suitable stories for different age groups.
- It can be a positive learning experience to adapt the Steiner approach to suit their own current practice. For example, teachers have developed the multi-sensory learning with beanbags to include elements of French language in addition to the numeracy and English oral literacy work. They have also experimented to good effect with using the finished paintings as a basis for further work.
- A deeper understanding of the whole child has been gained through an awareness of how each pupil approaches the art work and the kinaesthetic practice.
- As teachers themselves there has been a joyful enthusiasm about developing and practising their own creativity.

There have, however, of course been challenges. These include the following:

- Large class sizes and space restrictions have made it complicated to move desks to one side in order to clear space for multi-sensory learning practice and the remaining space is somewhat cramped.
- Curriculum pressures have meant that it is difficult to give as much time as might be welcomed to some of the work. For example, the multi-sensory or kinaesthetic work in Steiner schools takes up around 40 minutes first thing in the morning on a daily basis. This provides continuity and allows a controlled development of complexity to take place.
- Whilst the implementation of drawing has been very positive, the Steiner approach to painting

with wet paint on wet paper has been more complex. Work with painting boards and wet paper was on the whole too time consuming to set up for such large numbers beforehand and it was felt that this would be a technique that would be used only occasionally. It would, however, add to the teachers' existing repertoire of artistic skills. (Because this technique is embedded in Steiner practice from an early age, pupils learn to set up their boards etc themselves and doing so and clearing up is as much a part of the art lesson as the painting itself.)

- Pupils' initial scepticism at working with the art materials in the required way had to be overcome. To start with there was some reluctance to follow the instructions and to paint or draw in a particular way rather than to use the free expression to which they are more accustomed. However, this was won over partly by pupils' feelings of pleasure in the results and partly simply by their becoming more accustomed to this approach.
- Teachers had to overcome their own initial reluctance to 'be exposed' through doing their own art work in front of the class and to move out of their own 'comfort zone'. However, pupils' responses were highly encouraging and an atmosphere of genuine collaborative learning was achieved between teacher and pupils.
- Whilst considerable interest has been expressed in the benefits of story-telling, most teachers at present feel hesitant about using this approach. This is an area where further training would be welcomed by at least some of the staff.
- The element of music within the project was, in the end, not pursued. This was principally because it was felt there was enough new material to be absorbed in the allotted time already but a general lack of confidence was also expressed in taking forward what was perceived to be a more specialised skill.

The Future

Those teachers who have been involved on the project would like to continue implementing the new approaches where possible. Their aim is that all classes should be supplied with the wax blocks for drawing with, so that the new enthusiasm for drawing might be shared. They would also like to see the multi-sensory learning embedded continuously from an early age as they understand this would impact positively on pupils with learning disabilities as well as on all pupils' coordination, rhythmic skills and cognitive abilities.

It had been hoped the Balgreen teachers might work with their colleagues within the time-scale of the project. Four additional teachers have expressed interest, but there has been little opportunity within the busy life of the school session so far for this on-going process to be taken up. The original group of teachers, however, now feel ready to share their new learning and skills on an ongoing basis and it is hoped that this dissemination might form part of next session's planning to enable all classes to benefit from the project's outcomes. It could possibly also be included in the School Improvement Plan for 2006/2007.

It is also planned that the new head-teacher will make a presentation to the Steiner School's staff on positive discipline and it is hoped that visits might take place with Steiner kindergarten teachers visiting Balgreen nursery. Future joint projects, perhaps on story-telling, may also take place and it is hoped to continue to arrange sports fixtures between the two schools.

The DVD which will result from the project is expected to be finalised after the summer break. It will enable other schools and local authorities to access the learning that has been achieved.

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