

## **Understanding ourselves – Understanding others**

*Helene Witcher evaluates an anti-sectarianism partnership project in Clackmannanshire*

### **Introduction**

This article describes a very practical project in the smallest mainland authority in Scotland. With less than 1.0% of the local population from minority ethnic groups, most of Clackmannanshire's school pupils have little first hand experience of cultural or religious diversity. While its schools have long been committed to promoting equality and fairness, the availability of some additional funding through the Scottish Government's Anti-Sectarianism Project Fund, helped, during 2007-2008, to extend children's experience and understanding significantly.

The process of preparing for and undertaking the project, as well as coming to terms with some of its outcomes in the community, had an important and lasting impact also on the teachers and other adults involved.

The *Understanding Ourselves – Understanding Others* project aimed to develop new and existing community partnerships with five primary schools. These aimed to offer children either first hand experiences of cultural and religious diversity or a focussed opportunity, through interactive drama, to explore and discuss values and attitudes regarding similarity and difference.

The community partners working on the project were INTER-ACT (part of Forth Valley NHS Health Promotion Department), Central Scotland Racial Equality Council (CSREC), Alloa Mosque and Annette Street Primary School in Glasgow which includes around 95% minority ethnic pupils.

The work had an impact on learning across the four broad purposes of the Curriculum for Excellence; providing experiences to support pupils in becoming responsible citizens, effective contributors, confident individuals and successful learners. And the authenticity and practicality of the learning experiences ensured an impact across the curriculum, most particularly in PSHE, RME, education for citizenship and in

communication skills. Above all, the nurturing and development of community based partnerships made possible valuable learning experiences that would not have occurred otherwise. These in turn, had an impact on parental involvement and on relationships with the wider school community.

### **The Partners**

The partnership between Clackmannanshire Council education services and INTER-ACT is longstanding. The organisation provides training and practical support to teachers in using interactive drama techniques with children and young people. The continuation of the partnership in 2007-2008 build on anti-sectarianism worked started in 2006-2007.

The partnership with Central Scotland Racial Equality Council, prior to this project, had been largely at an institutional level. Fortuitously, some additional funding for education work made it possible for CSREC to become an active partner, not only in facilitating the links with Annette Street Primary School in Glasgow and with the creator of the Persona Doll used by Alva Primary School, but also in offering support to other aspects of the project.

The partnership with Alloa Mosque was influenced by contact from the local MP who had been approached by the local Muslim community for support in building links with schools. Although some schools had previously visited the Mosques in Glasgow or Stirling, few were aware of the relatively new Mosque in Alloa or of the readiness of the Imams to welcome visitors of all ages. This partnership was significant in light of the publicity surrounding the arrest and subsequent conviction on terrorist charges of a young Muslim man who had gone to school and who still lived in the local community. Thus, using the project specifically to challenge Islamophobia had a particular local relevance and importance.

Individually and collectively, the partnerships shared the aims of (i) promoting children's understanding of cultural and religious similarities and differences, and (ii) promoting values consistent with equality and fairness to help children to recognise, challenge and overcome intolerance.

## **Planning in Partnership**

A series of partnership meetings took place in the autumn to discuss and agree areas of work and, in January, a shared development and planning day was set up to:

- establish a sense of common purpose and mutual support for all participants within the Project, based on shared values regarding equality and fairness
- increase understanding of sectarianism and of Islamophobia
- share information about the different strands of the Project
- plan activities/resources for working with classes including pre and post project evaluation tools.

For many teachers, the opportunity to stand aside from the classroom and reflect with others on the values underpinning their practice is still quite rare. So the day started with each school and partner sharing their experience and what was important about it in terms of equality and diversity; this informed the subsequent afternoon planning sessions based around four themes: using a Persona Doll with infants; using interactive drama with P6/P7 to challenge prejudice and bigotry; twinning P5/P6 with a multi-ethnic city school; and developing a practical resource to support school visits to Alloa Mosque.

## **Partnership in Practice**

Each of the four strands was pursued and developed through sustained partnership work. Firstly, a sessional worker from INTER-ACT provided support to four classes in three schools spending six sessions with each of the four teachers and their classes, using cooperative learning strategies initially to promote group work skills and then working on cliff-hanger scenarios developed by the teachers.

Teachers' feedback confirmed the value of interactive drama techniques as tools to help children explore attitudes and values and to rehearse, in safe settings, behaviours and reactions in challenging situations. They described an increase in the children's confidence and in their readiness to think through and discuss how they would respond to situations of prejudice or discrimination. Group discussion with a visiting MP also gave the children a public opportunity to describe how they had used

interactive drama techniques and the issues of fairness and equality that they had explored.

The Persona Doll was introduced into two P1 classes and named Asim. The teachers developed a family and cultural background for him and wove him into a Katie Morag story. They introduced his parents as having come to Scotland from Pakistan and the family as Muslim. Asim was born in Scotland, speaks English and Urdu and wears sometimes traditional Muslim clothes and sometimes western clothes. The children compared and contrasted his clothes, skin colour and physical characteristics and his family story with those of Katie Morag. Asim was also used in circle time discussions about looking and/or feeling different.

A visit to the classes by a local MSP highlighted the readiness and capacity of the infants to display their understanding of the ethnic and cultural similarities and differences between Katie Morag and Asim. Local press coverage of this visit included one negative report that was picked up by several national papers. This included an allegation that Asim represented a 'golliwog' that would promote rather than challenge racism. These allegations were refuted by Clackmannanshire Council, by CSREC and, on STV, by Asim's creator who, through CSREC, was a partner in the project.

Although this negative publicity was upsetting for the school involved, it prompted a lot of discussion. Amongst the partners, it confirmed the importance of the work being pursued and their commitment to support each other. Asim remains in the school which will continue to use him.

Thirdly, contact was made by classes in two Clackmannanshire primary schools with Annette Street PS in Glasgow. Children exchanged initial letters and photographs describing themselves and their families. The majority of children at Annette Street are Malaysian, Roma or originate from Pakistan. Many are asylum seekers or refugees and their life experience differs hugely from that of children in Clackmannanshire. Initially, some Clackmannanshire pupils were startled to realise their 'buddy' was black or of a different ethnic origin from themselves; teachers

responded by discussing similarities and differences and challenging racial stereotypes.

The classes exchanged Spring Cards and, in May, one class visited Annette Street PS where children met their buddies. The Clackmannanshire children showed a power point presentation about their school and community before they played games in mixed teams and picnicked in Queen's Park. The Clackmannanshire teachers valued this chance to extend their pupils' experience of cultural and religious difference and similarity; for Annette Street pupils, the link illustrated a new, more rural, picture of Scotland.

Finally, Alloa Mosque worked throughout the project welcoming groups of primary teachers to the Mosque, in advance of pupil visits, to see the space and discuss the workshop sessions provided for visiting classes. The Imam visited individual schools and classes to meet the children before a Mosque visit and to talk with them about Islam. This openness and approachability on the part of the Imam resulted in the development of informed, friendly relationships in which teachers and pupils felt entirely comfortable when visiting the Mosque or asking questions. Importantly, parents who joined the class visits also spoke positively about the experience for themselves and for the children.

The partnership has resulted in a booklet being developed and issued to all primary schools in Clackmannanshire describing how links with and a visit to the Mosque can support not only religious and moral education but also contribute to pupils' wider understanding of equality and diversity.

### **Gauging Success of a Partnership Project**

The initial development and planning day established a sense of common purpose amongst the partners and although there were inevitable hiccups during the course of the year, that sense of purpose remains secure. Regular meetings and email contact between partners provided mutual support, particularly when facing negative press coverage.

This included vituperative local criticism of taking children to the Mosque ('Mosque visits 'utter rubbish', Wee County News, 20 February 2008) as well as some coverage of the Persona Doll ('School race doll branded 'return of the golliwog', The Scotsman, 3 April 2008). While regrettable, the coverage cemented, for schools and for community partners, the importance of challenging stereotypes, prejudices, sectarianism and racism through education and through working together. In this respect, it has raised the profile of the work in Clackmannanshire and reminded all partners of the value of their efforts.

The impact of the project has been evident in the high quality of children's participation and their verbal and written responses across each strand of the project. Almost all of this has reflected their interest in and positive views about cultural difference. Sometimes, pupils expressed racist views. Teachers felt that this was 'better out than in' and that the project was designed to help them explore and address such views. The partnerships were particularly important in contextualising children's learning and providing practical and authentic opportunities to explore cultural and religious similarities and difference.

### **Next Steps**

It is clear that the investment in these partnerships has had an important impact on children's learning and on staff development in relation to challenging prejudice and promoting equality.

The partnership with the Mosque has resulted not only in a practical resource for schools but in a deeper understanding of what the Mosque offers the school community. Promoting further partnership work should help to reduce Islamophobia and the stereotyping of Muslims in the community. Pdf copies of the booklet are available on request. Although it describes the programmes available at Alloa Mosque, it may be helpful to other schools developing partnerships with the Mosque in their communities.

The practical partnership work with CSREC illustrated the range of ways in which the organisation can support our schools in promoting equality and fairness and the Council hopes to develop the partnership further. INTER-ACT remains a key partner in providing Clackmannanshire schools with access to skilled and sensitive support

that helps teachers, children and young people to develop positive values, attitudes and behaviours and the resilience and skills to challenge injustice.

The kind of work undertaken in this project is never finished nor complete.

Challenging prejudice and promoting equality remains a fundamental element of lifelong education at all stages. School staff, community partners and pupils should all continue to have opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of what are complex contemporary issues and to further their commitment and their capacity to recognise and challenge injustice.