

Culture and creativity improving oracy.

Building parental engagement and improving the learning of GRT pupils through a creative and cultural curriculum

Market Harborough Church of England Academy

Diocese of Leicester

Context

Market Harborough Church of England Academy is a primary school within the Learn Academies Trust. The school has a small number of pupils (5-9% of all pupils) from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities, some of whom are from financially disadvantaged families. The school identified that this group of pupils often felt isolated within the local community and that the social divides were becoming wider as they progressed through the school. Furthermore, whilst Key Stage 1 data was presenting an improving picture, disadvantaged pupils and pupils from GRT communities were not a part of that picture and further work was needed to develop their early literacy and oracy. The school also recognised a need to improve the attendance of these pupils and to engage more effectively with parents.

The project

Based on this context the key aims for Market Harborough were to:

- Engage effectively with parents
- Develop oracy and promote better literacy development
- Improve attendance, particularly of pupils from the GRT communities
- Raise standards in reading and writing in Key Stage 1

The project was designed to improve pupils' academic achievement by increasing parental engagement in their children's learning and developing the cultural and creative opportunities within the curriculum. Based on educational research and the experience of other schools within the Learn Academies Trust, Market Harborough designed a project involving cultural opportunities such as choral singing, story telling, art and poetry. The original idea was to involve all the pupils and help them work towards special performances to which parents and carers would be invited, helping to improve parental engagement.

To prepare for these performances some of the Unlocking Gift grant was used to bring in a Leading Music Practitioner from within the academy trust. Two events were planned and themes chosen – Key Stage 1 created an event called 'Once Upon a Rime', linked to story and song and Key Stage 2 focused on local characters and personalities, called 'Made in

Market Harborough'. Both events involved singing, presenting and acting and Key Stage 2 also created a printed book with biographies written by the pupils about the local people featured in the performance. These events created a focal point for the children's hard work as well as providing a key opportunity for parental engagement.

Early Years and Foundation Stage (EYFS) pupils were also included in the project with some of the grant being used to buy Storytelling Schools resources and training for teachers. This enabled the school to extend the creative approach to their youngest pupils. A storytelling expert was also brought in to help all the children to develop their presenting and storytelling skills.

The sustainability of the project was developed through a strong focus on teacher professional development. At the start of the programme, participating teachers had a professional development session and they also attended sessions led by the Leading Music Practitioner. This enabled the teachers to lead rehearsals and it allowed them to learn the skills they needed to continue the project beyond the input of the Leading Music Practitioner. Some of the grant was used to release staff so that they could engage with research-evidence around vocabulary, oracy and reading development in the context of the project. This gave staff valuable time to collaborate, carry out quality planning and continue the research-informed approach of the project.

What worked?

The central aim of this project was to improve the literacy and oracy of disadvantaged pupils, particularly Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, through increased parental engagement and the development of the curriculum. The use of expertise within the Learn Academy Trust and the focus on staff professional development gave the project a solid grounding but the impact on the pupils, particularly those from the GRT communities was not as strong as the school had initially hoped.

Towards the end of the first year there were positive signs. An oracy and wellbeing questionnaire used with the pupils before and after the first year of the project showed improved scores for the majority of the target group of pupils. Feedback from parents about the performances was also generally positive and teachers reported an increased confidence in pupils and a greater willingness to present and discuss in class. However, the school also recognised that there was still an issue with school attendance in the target group and more needed to be done to ensure pupils from disadvantaged or GRT backgrounds were included in the out of school activities.

Market Harborough took a very reflective, evaluative approach throughout the project, allowing them to recognise these issues. This approach also enabled the school to make the decision in the first year of the project that the second year Unlocking Gifts funding

should be deferred. Due to significant staff changes and external pressures, the headteacher decided that the grant would be better used at another time when they could ensure the project was properly developed based on their learning from the first year.

Despite this gap in the project, the school was able to show further positive outcomes of their initial work. Pupils' oracy continued to improve across the year following the first year of funding, and in EYFS 50% met GLD (Good Level of Development) and 25% were close to this threshold. Pupils tracked using a language score measure also made good progress and national data showed that outcomes in literacy were at least at national average. In addition, attendance for the pupils from the GRT communities improved and a Culture Club specifically for the development of singing and poetry for quieter, less confident disadvantaged pupils was developed.

What next

Despite the challenges, the headteacher had a clear vision for the way forward to develop the project when it was reinstated. Learning from the first year of work, the school adapted their approach in order to increase the engagement of GRT pupils and focus on improving oracy and vocabulary across the school. Whilst the performance focus of the first year had a good impact on the pupils involved, the project team realised that it was not so successful at engaging the target group and the labour-intensive event approach was not sustainable. Rather than focusing on a few large-scale performances, the school has developed a cross-curricular approach, trying to ensure that performance and creativity are included across the school day, for example in assemblies or presentations within the classroom. The focus on staff development will also continue through the training of Oracy Leads who will deliver regular CPD to teachers to secure a positive change in teaching.