

The Synergy Project for Primary Schools

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The *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* defines the word "synergy" as the combined power of a group of things when they are working together which is greater than the total power achieved by each working separately.

This was precisely the intended effect of the bringing together of a group of thirteen people including an assistant director, three Education Officers, one subject Coordinator and eight peripatetic teachers from the Art, Music, Drama and Complementary Education sections of the Curriculum Department. These officers designed and piloted a project intended to present to teachers of Year Two classes a gamut of theme-related teaching strategies that could appeal to children of different abilities and personalities.

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The rationale behind this approach was based on Howard Gardner's theory of the Seven Intelligences and Myers' and Briggs' theory of the sixteen personality types. (This had been an important theme of an international workshop that the project coordinator had attended at the Council of Europe Language Centre in Graz, in June 1997). Both Gardner's and Myers/Briggs theories imply that different people have different learning styles. It is therefore useless, if not actually harmful, for pupils to be treated as though they were clones of a prototype. Dunn *et al* (1989) state that a learning style is a biologically and developmentally imposed set of personal characteristics that make the same teaching method effective for some and ineffective for others. Nevertheless some teachers address all pupils as a homogenous group and expect them to learn and work in a uniform way - an approach that has given rise to the term 'the uniform school'.

The Synergy Project tried to do away with uniformity by using a host of teaching

strategies from different curriculum areas. Different strategies were meant to appeal to pupils of different abilities and types. Since a secondary objective of the project was English oracy, English was used throughout, thus giving the children an immersion exercise.

Project Description

Climate Setting. The project took off with an introductory meeting for the Heads of the identified schools. During this meeting Heads were introduced to the project and were given the opportunity to socialize with the team. At a later stage members of the project team paid an orientation visit to the school during which they talked about the project with the Year Two teachers, explaining the art work that needed to be produced for the day when the team would bring the project to the school.

Method

The visit started with a plenary session for the pupils and their teachers in the school hall. Everyone was encouraged to participate in a welcome song which included lots of movements. This created a feeling of well-being and fun. Imaginary characters were then introduced by means of a telephone which provided a real purpose for communication and pupil involvement. Small props, such as a policeman's hat and soft toys served to make changes of character more credible to the children and more enjoyable. This session came to an end with a repeat of the opening song to which the children marched to their classes.

The second session started with the display of a big picture of a plastic house in a garden (the theme of the project). After using some sound effects, the team made the children guess who was inside the house. Questioning fired the children's imagination. Different types of creatures or monsters were mentioned. Afterwards it was time for the children to make the creature out of a paper bag accompanied by conversation centering on the number of





The creature comes to life

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noses, eyes etc. that the creature was said to have. This session came to an end with children making paper bag creatures and having them talk to each other and to their peers.

In the afternoon, children were taken to the hall again and made to experience art and music on a rotation basis. So while one group worked on a huge frieze of a plastic house, another learnt a song about mysterious things that the creature was eating. Children were totally involved in community singing with such songs as

*Five fat sausages, sizzling in a pan
One went pop, then it went bang.*

The day came to an end when the ‘creature’ finally came out of the house and all the children sang the welcome song again.

Evaluation

Methodology. The impact of the project on the 67 classes involved, was evaluated through informal interviews with Heads of School, Class Teachers and Complementary Education Teachers. Information was also gathered by observation of the project in action by members of the organisation team who coordinated the project.

In addition a questionnaire was distributed to all Class and Complementary Education Teachers who had been involved between October and December. 74 completed questionnaires were returned.

Findings

The general response to the project was a very positive one. 69 out of 74 teachers thought that the project had had some effect on their pupils’ use of English. While nobody is claiming miracles, it is significant that so many teachers said they noticed an effect despite the fact that this was a one off activity conducted by strangers.

When asked whether they themselves use such strategies as were shown in the project, 65 replied in the affirmative, and only 7 in the negative. The latter mentioned shortage of time

and syllabus constraints as the main cause for not using such methods.

Asked which strategies they actually use, most teachers said they used art, drama, story telling. Music trailed somewhat behind the other arts. Class Teachers seem to look upon music as the specialized subject par excellence.

Asked whether they thought these strategies would make a difference to their class, 45 out of 74 replied ‘yes’. Among those who did not tick the ‘yes’ option, were some who said they had never stopped using these methods since they learnt about them in college.

Teachers answers to open-ended questions gave the project organisers very interesting feedback. Several respondents stressed the joy shown by the children during the team’s visit, some adding that a full day of activities was too much for the children to cope with. Many stressed the value of collaboration and wished they had timetabled slots to enable them engage in similar collaboration with their colleagues.

Conclusion

Collaboration was in fact the name of the game. The teachers who formed the synergy team used a lot of time and energy in order to share their expertise with the Year Two teachers. At the same time they also gained a lot from their synergistic approach to teaching. Prior to the project they had mainly concentrated on their subject. At the planning and implementation stages of the project they had to look at a theme through the eyes of a teacher specialist from another discipline, integrate their skills and at times even cover for each other when a colleague fell sick. Team members were all the time sharing and learning in an environment that was dramatically opposed to the traditional one of teacher isolation, which Lieberman (1995) terms as the most powerful impediment to school reform. These teachers had problems, but they learnt to overcome them and to feel comfortable in each other’s presence. This encouraged them to take risks, such that when a music teacher fell ill, a drama teacher teacher acted as a substitute, proving that a teacher does not need to be a Pavarotti to use songs in the classroom.

Note. The synergy project has by now gone through its first and second phases and has to date visited 41 Primary schools. The remaining schools will be visited during the last school term.

References

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