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Shakespeare goes back to primary school

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Accelerating English for additional language learners through Shakespeare

This project considered whether teaching Shakespeare can raise the attainment of Year 1 English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils in literacy, oracy and self-esteem. It also explored how continuing professional development (CPD) sessions for teachers around postcolonial, Bollywood and other South Asian Shakespeares might help their effectiveness in the multicultural classroom. Dr Claire Chambers from the Department of English and Related Literature, in collaboration with Dr Sarah Olive, Department of Education, Leeds City Council, Artforms, Leeds Playhouse (LP), Globe Education and Tribe Arts, piloted the project in six Leeds primary schools with significant numbers of British-Pakistani and British-Bangladeshi pupils. Together, project partners tested out an approach that provides access to resources, training and practitioner-led workshops. Introducing pupils to Shakespeare's language at a young age proved invaluable to the development of their vocabulary and confidence, both in and out of the classroom.

The research

In Leeds, many children are starting school below age-related expectations, with evidence suggesting that without the right support they don't catch up. Add language in as an additional barrier, and these pupils can be at a major disadvantage when compared to their peers whose first language is English. And yet multilingualism is an asset that should be harnessed and celebrated.

The aim of the project was to engage teachers and their pupils in creative approaches to literacy, oracy and emotional intelligence. Each of these skills was developed through the use of Shakespearean stories, intensive teacher training, in-class support by a team of learning consultants, and a focus on the national curriculum. In a participatory (and fast) first session, a Globe Education practitioner visited schools and introduced a play's key characters and plot. The session was followed up by a LP drama practitioner who over five weeks carried out in-depth work with the pupils around the story. Following CPD with Chambers and others, teachers took on the model and adapted it with a different Shakespeare story. They received mentoring throughout, and this was followed up with an assessment and feedback from the practitioner.

The outcome

The pilot helped demonstrate the value of teaching Shakespeare through creative methods. Chambers' work has shown that introducing Shakespeare at a young age can have a very positive effect on EAL learner's oracy and literacy skills, as well as developing confidence in teachers to deliver Shakespeare in an innovative way. To mark the end of the project, the six primary schools involved in the pilot scheme came together for a celebration, with teachers, parents and pupils all present. Tribe Arts gave an electrifying Shakespearean performance with great use of colour, effects and costumes, helping to bring the stories to life. All attendees, particularly the very young pupils, were fully absorbed in the performance, emphasising that theatre is for everyone (not to be colonized by a white, middle-class, and older audience). Numerous primary schools across the Leeds city region are now investing and introducing the resources and classroom approaches in their own curricula. The resource packs can be downloaded through the University of York webpage, and are available free of charge to any school wishing to introduce this way of teaching and learning.



TRIBE ARTS



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