



RSC Associate Schools programme Case Study

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It is a great challenge for any teacher to set up, facilitate and grow, a successful cluster of schools in an area such as County Durham, where there is high unemployment matched with low aspirations among many parents and pupils, but introduce Shakespeare into the mix and it becomes even harder.

Widely seen as the preserve of the elite, teachers can receive apathy or even direct opposition to teaching Shakespeare in the curriculum, where it may be looked upon as irrelevant at best, or hated with a vengeance at worst, by parents who were forced to study him from dusty old books in uninviting classrooms. Teachers who have never studied Shakespeare may be apprehensive about becoming part of the RSC's Associate Schools Programme. A radical change of culture in both the schools and the community is often necessary.

Combine financial pressures on school budgets, a narrow and uncreative National Curriculum forced on schools by government, and lack of expert knowledge by teaching staff, the question is often, 'Where do we start and how do we achieve results?' As a Lead Associate Teacher working in partnership with the RSC for the last nine years, I hope to offer some insights into this question.

The Lead Associate School, Crook Primary in the north-east of England, is in an area of deprivation and high unemployment, and many parents are third generation unemployed. It has a 500 pupil population which is stable and 50 members of staff. The proportion of pupils supported through Pupil Premium is above average, as is the proportion of pupils who have SEN and/or disabilities. Most pupils are of white British heritage and the proportion of pupils who speak English as an additional language or who are from minority ethnic groups is below the national average. Most of the other schools in the cluster are very similar in composition.

The school already had some links with other schools in the area before joining the RSC's programme in 2009, making it easier for the Lead Teacher to present a case to all the Head Teachers, setting out aims and objectives, pedagogy and financial details. The Lead Teacher and Head Teacher believed that six schools was an excellent number for the cluster initially,



to ensure good communication and a quality experience for staff and pupils. This soon rose to eleven schools and has remained successful and stable throughout.

Choosing the Lead teacher is an important step to ensure success and longevity. The individual needs to be motivated and passionate about making the work happen, have excellent organisational and interpersonal skills and be prepared to offer support to Associate Schools in partnership with the RSC, providing training and ensuring teachers and pupils have the skills and information necessary to produce excellent learning in classrooms and high quality Shakespeare public performances. This is a big expectation from one teacher and two teachers working together to share the workload is ideal.

Head teachers are an extremely important part of the Associate Schools Programme as without their support, financially and pedagogically, a project of this type would be difficult to sustain and the aim of Crook Primary was to make their involvement with the RSC and with Shakespeare's work, into a long term goal and embed this work and pedagogy into the whole school curriculum, as well as ensuring that the cluster of Associate Schools would be involved in the long term. One of the advantages to point out to prospective Head teachers, is that the cost of the work can be shared equally by the cluster, which makes it easily affordable and good value for money.

Once the Head teachers are committed to the Associate Schools Programme there remains the task of convincing the parents that Shakespeare is relevant in today's classroom and is not the prerogative of an intellectual elite. Most schools in the cluster experienced some hostility from parents initially, who had had negative experiences during their own lessons at school, and assumed their children would endure the same experience or had not encountered Shakespeare before. The best way forward was to tackle the attitudes of parents through their pupils by providing high quality, exciting Shakespeare lessons steeped in the RSC's rehearsal room techniques and pedagogy, culminating in a performance for parents. Children were so enthusiastic about the new Shakespeare lessons they engaged their parents in conversations about them regularly, some parents reporting that their child had never volunteered information about lessons before. In answer to the question, 'What have you done at school today?' their usual reply was, 'Not much.' Now they were explaining themes, characters and plot to parents, asking questions and wanting to read books about Shakespeare and his plays. Parents began talking about Shakespeare in the playground while waiting for their children and the whole community accepted that this was special and it was happening in their town.

The children were eager for their Shakespeare lessons and their passion and enthusiasm convinced parents that something important was happening in their child's education. The current situation is a total reversal, whereby parents now complain to staff if their child is not timetabled for regular Shakespeare lessons. As a result, to satisfy demand, the Lead Teacher was taken out of her class teacher role and instead was employed to teach



Shakespeare across the school from Reception to Year 6. This strengthened the pedagogy and ethos throughout the school and ensured rehearsal room approaches were firmly embedded into the school curriculum. After watching all pupils from all eleven schools perform in the Associate Schools Regional Shakespeare Festival in Bishop Auckland last year, Fiona Clayton, Programme Lead at the RSC commented, 'You can see that these children have Shakespeare in their bones.'

This pattern was repeated in the Associate Schools due to good quality training by the RSC, either in-house or in Stratford upon Avon, the excellent quality of teaching provided by the teaching staff in all schools and the intervention workshops provided by theatre partner, Newcastle Theatre Royal, who were on hand to provide extra support, tailored to the needs of each school and teacher. It is vital that the Lead teacher is in regular communication with all teachers so they feel supported and have the information they need to provide high quality lessons.

Some teachers arrive at RSC INSET days with no previous Shakespeare knowledge and in some cases have been 'volunteered' to participate in the Associate Schools programme with little prior discussion. Naturally they feel unprepared and perhaps anxious. Others may actually feel hostile to Shakespeare and perhaps feel that drama is not their naturally preferred teaching style. This where the Lead Teacher must know when and where to offer the right type of support, through meetings, sharing resources, providing workshops in their school or recommending appropriate training. Additionally, one of the most effective resources is the combined knowledge, expertise and passion of the established Associate Teachers. Teachers learn best from other teachers and the excellent practice and sharing of skills throughout the cluster has been, and continues to be strong, particularly among the teachers who have participated in training together at the RSC in Stratford. A great strength of the cluster is the respect the teachers show each other and the value they place on their collective work. They all have ownership of the work and the Lead teacher plans progression for each teacher, giving them opportunities to direct performances, work on producing sets, props, costumes and text in an inclusive environment.

The result of this work has been phenomenal in all eleven schools. Shakespeare is taught regularly in all schools and RSC rehearsal room techniques have become embedded into the curriculum and used across other subjects, particularly Literacy, History, Geography, Computer Studies, Physical Education and Science. Teachers have regular CPD in RSC rehearsal room techniques as part of their appraisal requirements. All schools perform in public Shakespeare festivals and many in productions in addition to the Associate Schools programme. Teachers have disseminated their RSC training in their own schools and encouraged a creative approach to lessons among their colleagues. Most schools share coordinated Shakespeare work across the whole school, organising their own Shakespeare activities tailored to their specific requirements. Every year over 300 pupils perform to 600 parents and their community in a Shakespeare Festival, but this is just the tip of the iceberg.



Over 3,000 pupils and almost 200 teachers are involved in Shakespeare work every year, geographically spread between Durham, Darlington and Sunderland with a further school joining us this year from Tyne and Wear.

Research has been conducted, based on a piece of research by The University of Warwick, Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research, published January 2018, to measure the impact of various aspects of the Associate Schools Programme on the cluster of schools. The following results are based on responses from all teachers involved in leading the programme in their Associate schools.

100% of teachers reported that working in the Associate Schools Programme has vastly improved their teaching skills and made them more passionate about staying in teaching.

97% of teachers reported increased confidence in planning engaging lessons across in literacy and across other curriculum areas due to involvement in the Associate Schools programme.

95% of teachers reported improved behaviour by pupils with recognised behaviour problems during Shakespeare lessons.

97% reported that their pupils were substantially more engaged in lessons across the curriculum since starting the programme.

97% reported that their pupils were actively researching and reading Shakespeare outside of lessons.

94% reported an increased awareness of theatre among pupils and an increase in pupils attending theatre performances with parents.

97% of teachers reported that their pupils had increased confidence in speaking and listening and in presenting/performing in public.

98% of teachers reported that their expectations of their pupil's ability to understand and use Shakespeare's language had risen significantly.

95% of teachers reported a significant improvement in attainment in boy's writing.

95% of teachers reported a significant improvement in Y6 SATS results in reading, one school reporting a rise of 5 points from the previous year.

96% of teachers reported that using theatre approaches helped to engage SEN pupils as well as academically able pupils.



94% of teachers reported that their Shakespeare work in school has had a positive response from parents and the wider community.

In 2018 Crook Primary School's OFSTED report stated,

'Shakespeare lessons explore rich language and drama. Inspectors observed pupils, many of whom had a history of challenging behaviour, captivated as they explored Julius Caesar. Visits to Stratford upon Avon bring learning alive for pupils.'