Sheffield Buddying Case Study: Raising boys’ attainment
Background

Despite recent rises in Sheffield’s Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) results, analysis demonstrated that boys consistently scored less well in all areas of learning, particularly in Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL). The graph below shows that boys trail girls by 15% in CLL.

![Graph showing EYFSP results for national and Sheffield, with boys and girls comparison]

The Buddying project gave us the opportunity to address this complex and multi-layered issue and combine other service priorities, e.g. promoting effective use of the outdoor environment, mark making and the self-evaluation and improvement agenda.

What was planned?

Sheffield’s Learning and Achievement Service and Sheffield Hallam University worked in collaboration to build the project around high-quality Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and invited practitioners from across the EYFS sector including childminders. This meant that course participants were at different levels of qualification and that they would achieve an outcome at their level. The course content was based around action research which encouraged investigation of boys' engagement, CLL, Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED), and effective use of the outdoor environment leading to implementing changes in practice.

Each practitioner’s research questions are specific to their own setting and their own learning journey within the set parameters. This has meant a wide variety of practical changes have taken place including providing ‘boy friendly’ spaces to write and strategies that encompass boys’ interests. This variety will eventually give the LA published case studies from which we will be able to share the practitioners’ knowledge, experience and practice in future CPD.

A variety of networking opportunities are taking place to develop collaboration between participants. These include assignments with opportunities to work with their neighbours, with similar settings and those linked by a similar theme. There have also been more informal opportunities such as drop-ins, web forums and social events.
What was done and when and how?

**Action research to challenge thinking about gender and learning in the 21st century**

‘Hopes, dreams and desires...An action researcher hopes that they can create a change for the better, dreams of a better world and desires to make a difference.’ Glenda McNaughton and Patrick Hughes 2008.

Action research provides an effective mechanism for quality improvement within a setting. It is a process where the practitioner is empowered to identify and tackle issues while developing their own and the setting’s practice. The diagram below shows the cycle of development process: identifying the issues, creating a hypothesis, planning, taking action and then reflection. The whole reflective process is a practical approach to changing practice with the academic rigours to ensure quality outcomes.

**Action research for a learning Sheffield**

![Diagram showing the cycle of development process]

The best way to illustrate the process and the impact is by allowing practitioners to tell their own story. The case study in the appendix is of two practitioners, Abigail Ballin and Natasha Unwin.

**Impact and verification**

**Excitement, reflection, engagement and attainment**

The biggest impacts so far are those which are difficult to measure. The practitioners involved in the project have created a professional buzz among themselves, in their settings and across the Local Authority (LA). This has been created through giving the practitioners the time and permission to implement changes to their outdoor practice. They have relished the opportunity to focus on trying out their ideas and exploring in greater depth academic research and debate. This reflection has been particularly powerful as it not only challenged their own views especially with regard to ‘gender’ but has released their creativity.
Parameters of data

The structure of the action research course means that the ‘definitive change’ has only taken place at the beginning of May. Despite this practitioners have been focusing on trying out their ideas and formulating their strategies and then honing these into a workable research question. This focus on outdoor learning and engaging children has already had an impact.

Due to the structure of the course the data presented here is selective. The data comes from those schools using Sheffield’s web-based tracker and so is restricted to reporting on the Reception-age children’s progress.

Individuals

The action research project requires that at least three boys are identified as a ‘narrative vehicle’ to tell the story of the research. The strategies employed by the practitioners are not exclusive so are applied to all and therefore the impact will be on all children: boys and girls. The first table of data shows those identified as a narrative vehicle. The criteria for choosing these boys were that they were underachieving and they were not engaging in existing CLL activities.

These four selected schools had a specific focus on mark making/writing. The table below shows their baseline and progress through their average scale points achieved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>On-entry Sept</th>
<th>Baseline Jan</th>
<th>Achieved May</th>
<th>Achieved July</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>School A NIJ</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B IJ</td>
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<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C NI</td>
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<td>2.33</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
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<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Lessons learned and next steps

The Buddying project has enabled practitioners from different types of settings, maintained and non-maintained, to work together on a common theme. With the support of an EYFS consultant and a Sheffield Hallam University lecturer, practitioners have benefited from a theoretical and practical approach to a method of working. Participants have the opportunity to access accreditation towards an under/postgraduate degree through their case study work. The impact on everyday practice and outcomes for children, parents and practitioners is clearly evident and worthwhile.
Appendix

Further data showing impact of the project

Effect on all aspects of CLL: January–July 2009

Despite the focus on one aspect of CLL, the impact has transferred across all areas of CLL. The table below shows the writing focus schools used as an example previously.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>LCT Baseline Jan</th>
<th>LCT Achieved July</th>
<th>LSL Baseline Jan</th>
<th>LSL Achieved July</th>
<th>R Baseline Jan</th>
<th>R Achieved July</th>
<th>W Baseline Jan</th>
<th>W Achieved July</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
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<td>7.67</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>3.67</td>
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<td>6.00</td>
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<td>School B</td>
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<td>2.67</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
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<td>7.67</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
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<td>7.00</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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</table>

Effect on whole cohort

The individual boys identified as the ‘narrative vehicle’ are not the only beneficiaries of the project as the intention from the beginning of the project was to identify good outdoor practice for all. The table below shows all the web-based tracker schools’ CLL and PSED average scale points achieved comparing baseline to progress at the end of July. It shows that this accelerated progress is replicated across the whole cohort.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>LCT Jan</th>
<th>LCT July</th>
<th>LSL Jan</th>
<th>LSL July</th>
<th>Reading Jan</th>
<th>Reading July</th>
<th>Writing Jan</th>
<th>Writing July</th>
<th>D&amp;A Jan</th>
<th>D&amp;A July</th>
<th>ED Jan</th>
<th>ED July</th>
<th>SD Jan</th>
<th>SD July</th>
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<td>2.52</td>
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<td>2.30</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>5.58</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>6.47</td>
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<td>4.87</td>
<td>2.93</td>
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<td>School I</td>
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<td>6.10</td>
<td>2.56</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Action research attached to Sheffield’s third budding case study

Background context: Setting

- Abigail and Natasha both work in a private day-care nursery in the South of Sheffield.
- Natasha works with pre-school children in a room registered for 26, and Abigail is working with children aged from 2 to 3 in a room registered for 20.
- There are two outdoor spaces – a sensory garden and a large tarmac area with a small shelter space for the pre-school room.

Baseline data: Findings

- For Natasha the data highlighted the children’s interest in enclosed spaces; observations supported parents’ concerns about the development and opportunities about mark-making skills.
- For Abigail the data highlighted greater opportunities for spoken language when playing outdoors and the effect on behaviour.

Research questions:

- Abigail: How can I remodel the current outdoor provision and practice to raise boys’ achievement in speaking and listening?
- Natasha: How can I enhance the outdoor practice and provision to promote boys’ achievements in mark making?

Changes made: Practice

- We now spend more time outdoors (whatever the weather).
- Staff now engage in more sustained shared thinking with the children.
- Attitudes have changed towards children taking more risks and getting mucky!
- The whole staff team has had training on the importance of movement and how it affects ALL areas of development.
- Children are not expected to sit for as long as they were previously (indoors).
- Involvement of parents.

Changes made: Provision

- Natural resources and more use of the sensory garden.
- Tools and buckets for exploring the outdoor natural materials and sand.
- Dens and enclosed spaces.
- Jabadao activities and equipment.
Initial indicators

- An improvement in behaviour.
- Speech development and the developing confidence to use that speech.
- More widely accessed mark-making activities (indoors and out).
- Ages and stages trackers; still ongoing.

Comparisons and reflections on each other’s work – Comments from Abigail and Natasha:

‘There are obvious differences between the foci of our research but we have worked with each other and as part of a wider team involving all the staff. The work we have individually done has had an impact on both sets of children as they share the same outdoor space.’

‘Thinking back to the beginning of the year before we started this project we now have so much more knowledge and an understanding of the importance of outdoor play for boys and girls.’

‘We can still see many opportunities to develop our practice and provision which will be helped by the capital funding.’

‘Through reading we have been able to see the genetic and nurtured differences between boys’ and girls’ development; this was challenging knowing that one size does not necessarily fit all and changing our practice to give both boys and girls the best chance to develop.’

Acknowledgement

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