

The Benefits of Schools Linking for Social Development:

An Observational Study



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The Benefits of Schools Linking for Social Development: An Observational Study

Rochdale neutral venue visit

Executive Summary:

1. Schools Linking builds children's social skills, builds bonds across communities, and opens children up to crossing lines of difference:

- Children embraced the opportunity to interact with children who were different to them.
 - All children were supported in interacting effectively, with staff present to step in and encourage where necessary.
 - Linking reduced children's anxiety about interacting across lines of difference: this was supported through structured, familiar and well-selected activities that promoted interactions and positivity.
 - Throughout the Linking day children explored similarities and differences between themselves and their linking partners with openness, and ease, including questions around religion, identity, and language.
 - Shared experiences, such as watching a play, creative work and dance, create a sense of 'togetherness', that builds bonds across the linked schools, as well as encouraging cooperation and teamwork.
 - Linking provided opportunities for children to stretch their understanding and practice empathy.

2. Levers for change: TLN design and format ensures positive social mixing and impact on social skills and bonding

- Great care taken to ensure the visit meets the evidence-based conditions for effective social mixing to maximise impact on stereotypes
- Planning reduces anxiety and lets children focus on the interaction
- TLN neutral venue visits creates a sense of equal status that is essential for effective social mixing.
- Shared experience effectively builds bonds: At the neutral venue, children jointly experienced a play on the theme of friendship. This shared, new

experience had a powerful effect, and brought the children together. It built bonds between children, as well as providing a springboard for further discussions.

-Synchrony is embedded in all activities: Psychological research tells us these types of activities build bonds across lines of difference, and provide a good basis for more meaningful interactions. BY incorporating synchrony into the TLN activities (e.g. mirroring each others behaviours, music and song, clapping games), this enhances the experience, building bonds and creating the right conditions for positive social mixing.

-Activities are carefully planned and coordinated by TLN and their facilitators. Children and teachers could relax and focus on the day, in the safe hands of knowledgeable and experienced facilitators.

Objective and challenges of Schools Linking:

-we know that social mixing, meeting people across lines of difference, challenges stereotypes, builds children's confidence in meeting people who are different to them in some way, develops key skills for socialising. This is particularly important post-covid: we know social interaction skills are less developed in many young people who missed key opportunities to mix socially at a younger age.

-Schools Linking provides vital opportunities for children to have an encounter across lines of difference, build their social skills and confidence, and have a memorable learning experience.

-Psychological research tells us social mixing can go wrong- a negative experience can create anxiety around difference and reinforce stereotypes. Therefore programmes that bring different groups together in this way need to be very carefully managed.

Psychological research has identified key conditions necessary for 'social mixing' to have the biggest positive impact.

Aim of observations:

-determine whether The Linking network approach meets conditions for positive contact, is ensuring positive social mixing, and identify good practice.

- observe impact of linking on social interactions across lines of difference

-identify potential points in linking day where evaluation could be incorporated into the day

Findings:

Schools Linking builds children's social skills, builds bonds across communities, and opens children up to crossing lines of difference:

-Children embraced the opportunity to interact with children who were different to them.

-All children were supported in interacting effectively, with staff present to step in and encourage where necessary.

-Linking reduced children's anxiety about interacting across lines of difference: this was supported through structured, familiar and well-selected activities that promoted interactions and positivity.

-Throughout the Linking day children explored similarities and differences between themselves and their linking partners with openness, and ease, including questions around religion, identity, and language.

-Shared experiences, such as watching a play, creative work and dance, create a sense of 'togetherness', that builds bonds across the linked schools, as well as encouraging cooperation and teamwork.

-Linking provided opportunities for children to stretch their understanding and practice empathy.

Levers for change: Why Schools Linking is Effective in Promoting Social Development

-Great care taken to ensure the visit meets the evidence-based conditions for effective social mixing to maximise impact on stereotypes

Planning reduces anxiety and lets children focus on the interaction: The TLN model of linking involves significant levels of teacher planning and training, as well as pre-meeting preparation. This is integral to the effectiveness of the programme, and enhancing social mixing. Why does this make TLN more effective? Psychological evidence tells us that meeting new people, especially those different to us, is cognitively demanding, and requires significant attention from us as individuals. This can actually lead to negative interactions, as we don't have the capacity to pay attention to and respond to our interaction partner. By preparing carefully for the session, and ensuring children know the plan for the day, everyone can focus their energies on the interaction at hand.

My observations reinforced the value of the TLN model for supporting effective interactions: children and teachers were happy, reassured, and confident. What could have been a stressful situation, without adequate planning and support, was joyful, creative and buzzing with conversation and laughter.

TLN neutral venue visits creates a sense of equal status that is essential for effective social mixing:

Psychological research tells us that a requirement for effective social mixing, is for the groups is 'equal status', for the groups to be on an equal footing. The use of **a neutral venue is essential to the effectiveness of TLN.**

TLN go to great lengths to ensure that children are on an equal footing when they meet: including both schools being equally familiar with the games they will play, completing the same work prior to the meeting, and even arriving at the neutral venue at the same time. Using a neutral venue also creates a sense of equality as both schools will be equally unfamiliar with the venue without a sense of ownership over the space. This is

clear in the following observational notes I took at the start of one neutral venue visit I observed:

*There's a real sense of excitement in the air as the class await the other schools arrival. They all chat to one another quietly and keep jumping up to see if the other class have arrived. We are in a 'holding area' outside of the theatre. The pupils know the other school are on their way and will go into their holding area. Soon they will all meet up in the theatre. Someone shouts **'They're here!'** **Everyone runs to the window, children jump up and down in excitement: at long last their 'new friends' they have been talking with online and sending letters to are here.** A few children grab some pieces of paper from their pockets: their answers to questions their new friends had sent them – their favourite colour, their favourite sport, their football team. Along side the excitement there are nerves, and the teachers and facilitators explore these feelings with the children, and explain the butterflies in their tummies are perfectly normal: of course they might feel nervous alongside feeling excited, and the teachers will be there all day to help them.*

Shared experience builds bonds:

At the neutral venue, children jointly experienced a play on the theme of friendship. This shared, new experience had a powerful effect, and brought the children together. It built bonds between children, as well as providing a springboard for further discussions.

'The children all came into the theatre with their new friends from the other school, and sat all jumbled up in their new groups. One child insisted on being able to sit with their partner. There is excited chatter and giggling as they wait for the performance to begin. There were so many examples of joint attention between the linking partners, from catching each others' eye, pointing out different props on stage to each other, whispering ('is that real chicken?'), laughing together and smiling. This performance is a great ice breaker to ease children gently into the day.'

Not only did the performance bring young people together and build bonds, but it also explored the ups and downs of friendship, a topic children can relate to.

Synchrony embedded in all activities:

Activities are carefully planned and coordinated by TLN and their facilitators. Children and teachers could relax and focus on the day, in the safe hands of knowledgeable and experienced facilitators.

Many of the activities involved synchronous interactions, mirroring each others behaviours, music and song, clapping games. Psychological research tells us these types of activities build bonds across lines of difference in children and in adults. They are a shortcut to good social connections, and provide a good basis for more meaningful interactions.

By incorporating synchrony in the activities at TLN, this enhances the experience, building bonds and creating the right conditions for positive social mixing. But creating a safe space where children feel confident to engage in these activities with new friends, takes time and expertise. And TLN draws on their expertise to create these conditions.