

Raise Case Studies – Nottingham

Not Just Writing Letters Home

A project to improve interaction between a school and its local community

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This paper was contributed in 2004 to the RAISE Project. There is background information at www.insted.co.uk/raise.html.

Introduction: aims and hopes

Forest Fields Primary School in Nottingham wanted to improve communication with parents and the local community. It was not just a matter of writing better letters home or providing more information in mother tongue. They wanted everyone to have as much information about their children's work as if they had visited the school frequently and had spent time in classrooms as flies on the wall.

Further, they wanted to devise a way of making their practice explicit. They hoped that by doing this they would remove mistrust or misunderstandings about what went on in the school. And they wanted to provide something that would improve communication about school between parents and children – they hoped that parents would have useful and exciting discussions with their children about what they did in school. They hoped that as parents and prospective parents understood more about the work of the school, they would feel more confident about visiting and maybe getting more involved in parent support groups.

For instance, they wanted to make more explicit the value of play in the development of language and learning. They hoped that parents would understand that apparently random activities were carefully structured and designed to develop scientific enquiry and social skills, and to make sense of the adult world.

Looking around

The headteacher and EMAG coordinator met first to decide how they could best make the work of the school explicit. They looked at booklets produced by other schools and LEAs and particularly liked the photo books with short captions (often with versions in home language), which tried to give glimpses of the school day. They found the books produced by Margaret McMillan Nursery School in Islington and the Service for English as an Additional Language in Brighton and Hove particularly inspiring. Contact was made with an ICT team at Nottingham University who agreed to help them to produce a CD-Rom along similar lines. The advantage of this format was that it could include small video

clips of classroom events and could talk to parents as well as provide material to be read.

Since a CD-Rom was likely to take quite a long time to produce, and would only be accessible to parents who had their own computers or could use them through libraries or the school, it was decided to work first on the production of picture books. Books, since they would be unique and handmade, could be designed in a variety of ways, including jigsaws, zigzags and large formats. When tried and tested the books would provide a template for the production of a CD-Rom.

Topics

The following topics were provisionally agreed on:

- ❑ *I Like Reading* would explore the different ways in which children use their reading skills in their first language and English in school, at home and around the city
- ❑ *What did you do in school today?* would show a parent asking the questions and a child providing visual answers
- ❑ *A day in the life of the school* would show all the people who visit, bring things and take things away, from very early till very late meeting
- ❑ *First Day at Nursery School*
- ❑ *Visiting a Farm*
- ❑ Report on an idea going through school council
- ❑ Something on assemblies

The EMAG team worked with classroom teachers to construct frameworks for the books, refine the text and begin collecting appropriate photographs.

Many teachers wanted to involve the children in the production. This would slow the process but meant that parents would find out from their children about the production of the book long before it appeared.