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Speak, listen and change the world

Record entries in the fifth year of this awards scheme highlight teachers' awareness of the need for communication skills to promote citizenship and democracy in and outside school

Put upon Jo, a harrowing tale of playground bullying acted out by the touring theatre in education group CragRats, illustrates the citizenship and communication. The play raises issues that need to be brought into the open, discussed and acted upon. Pupils will be involved in helping their schools develop strategies for dealing not just with bullying, but in creating a positive climate of cooperation and democratic decision-making.

Sponsored by BT, CragRats is accompanied by a group of volunteer trainers from local BT offices that use the play to provoke discussion and explore the meaning of citizenship and communication among smaller groups of students. They also help schools submit their applications for the awards.

The play, the workshops and the awards are part of BT's annual £5m investment in schools. Each year some 4,000 BT volunteers support schools across the UK to mentor pupils and deliver a demonstration lesson based on material from BT's Communication Skills for Young Citizens DVD.

Last year's entries for the BT Schools Awards have included projects on playground buddy schemes, peer mentoring, school councils and building links with the local community. There is strong evidence of a local flavour: many entries from Northern Ireland, for example, related to improved understanding between Protestant and Catholic communities, while in Scotland there was a distinct ICT bias.

In all, there were 1,228 applications across the UK for 240 awards of £2,000 each. All regions have shown a sharp rise in applications, partly due to the streamlined online application process via the award's website. In addition, an extra £10,000 has been awarded to each of the best three schools among the award-winners: St Catherine's college, Armagh, which tackles conflict resolution (page 4), Welsh primary school Ysgol Llanllechid, Bethesda, which has linked up to schools in Jamaica (page 7), and Elmestoft VC primary school, Ipswich, whose Angolan project is described in this article.

This year, the spotlight is on com-

munication to bring sharper focus to entries. BT does not want schools to see the award as a convenient way to raise extra cash simply to smarten up the playground. Entries have to be meaningful. So citizenship now has to be firmly linked with communication and the development of basic skills.

"Speaking and listening are the key to being a good citizen," says Dave Hancock, BT education programme manager. "The ingredients we look for in a project are improved speaking and listening skills, creativity and innovation, and sustainability and involvement of a wider community."

He says one of the most memorable winners was Elmestoft primary school in Suffolk, with its collaborative storytelling project based on the experiences of an Angolan boy over in England to visit his aunt, who made several visits to the school to talk about life at home. Children then adapted an Angolan folk story about a fox and a wolf, reworking it from the perspective of a fox, a wolf, a sheep and a shepherd in Angola, while younger pupils wrote poems about life as they imagined it in Angola. Elmestoft now hopes to expand links with the boy's own school and is passing on its experience to other local schools.

Among some high-quality Welsh entries, Bishop Landaff secondary school in Cardiff won an award for its Worried Web – an email helpline staffed during school hours by pupils. The money has been paid for the dedicated helpline and for training pupils in counselling and online interview techniques.

"The scheme is part of our anti-bullying policy, but we've extended it to our 47 feeder primaries," says June Bowen-Jones, head of PSHE. "Transition from primary to secondary is a very important time when children need extra support."

BT does not want schools to see the award simply as a way to raise extra cash to smarten up the playground

Another imaginative entry is Broomwood primary school in Altrincham, Cheshire. Year 6 teacher and PSHE co-ordinator Nicola Gagon explains how the award grant pays for a part-time teacher to teach parents basic computing skills. "It's a great confidence boost for the children to share their knowledge of ICT with mums and dads and older siblings," she says. "We're involving the whole community in learning."

Judging the competition has been a challenge in view of the exceptionally high quality of entries. "Broadening the scope of the scheme to involve the community is in line with schools' own development ideas," says one of the judges, Colin McAndrew of Learning and Teaching Scotland.

Fellow Judge Ron Naylor, head of Forefield Junior school in Crosby and on the judging panel in the north-west, says: "Bids were involving the wider school community – children, non-teaching staff, governors and parents. These were sustainable projects of considerable value."

Each nation or region was well represented, with a particularly high turnout from the north-west, south-west and south-east. Most entries were from primary schools – surprising given the fact that citizenship is high on the 14-19 curriculum agenda.

Bids relating to school councils were popular in Wales – mirroring the National Assembly's requirement that these must be in place by September 2004. Some bids were put together with local education authorities and other agencies. And future applicants should bear in mind that schools in education action zones can double their award money by applying for it to be matched by the zone.

Teachers wanting to enter the 2004-2005 BT Schools Awards can apply online at www.btcp.com/education, which carries comprehensive information on judging criteria, helpful hints on project presentation and past examples of winning projects. Alternatively, you can request a printed application form from: BT Schools Awards Team, Edcoms, The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX. The closing date for entries is November 12 2004.

Stephen Hoare



It's good to talk: a scheme that aims to develop communication skills is having a positive impact





A positive effect on pupils at Whitley Abbey community school Photographs: Stephen Pond/Newsstream.co.uk

Words of wisdom

A native American technique used to resolve conflict has given youngsters the freedom to explore sensitive issues without fear. As a result, children are happier in class and brimming with confidence

Award: £2,000

WHITLEY ABBEY COMMUNITY SCHOOL, COVENTRY
Where is the Love? (citizenship, drama, PSE, 12-13 years)

Seated in a rough circle, the 30 or so children of year 7 are fidgeting, talking to each other, resisting the teacher's instructions to sit bright and pay attention. It's early afternoon in drama class on one of the last days of the summer term and demob happiness is in the air which doesn't augur well for the hour ahead. Finally, after more coaxing but no raised voice from teacher Fiona Goodwin, there is almost quiet. She asks the children to pick a colour that reflects their mood today. Goodwin herself goes first then we go round the circle. One picks orange -- "because it's my birthday"; another yellow -- "it's nearly the end of term"; another blue -- "I'm tired and fed up".

The whispers are dying away. Goodwin asks how they feel about new people

joining their class next year and how they imagine the newcomers might feel -- scared, lonely, worried, fearful of a new tutor, they think -- and then moves on to what makes a good tutor. The children are vocal on this point, as if it's touched a nerve: someone who's fair when you get told off; someone unbiased, who doesn't moan or is young, who never gives detentions.

Anyone who wants to respond has to signal for the "talking piece" (a teddy bear) and whereas only one or two were willing to speak at first, now five or six hands are going up.

When it shifts to what makes a perfect pupil, one boy touchingly says it would be someone like his friend, "who likes you the way you are and not something else". It's startling to hear 11- and 12-year-olds talk so eloquently about such sensitive stuff.

The exercise is called Council and it's based on the talking-it-out technique traditionally used by native Americans to resolve conflict. Here, the children have the freedom to explore sometimes highly sensitive issues without

fear that either their classmates or the teacher will shout them down.

"Council enables them to express difficult things without getting angry or frustrated and not to take it personally when people disagree," says Goodwin, who runs the school's learning support unit. "A lot of them don't see things worked out by adults in a safe way, they just hear shouting or see people refusing to talk."

Council was introduced by Goodwin following work she and the school had done with Robert Razz, a consultant who has worked with schools in the US -- and with the US space agency, NASA, among other organisations -- on improving communication skills.

In Goodwin's bid to tie the BT Schools Awards, she had envisaged developing drama and art work around the song Where is the Love? by the Blackstreet Peas, but it eventually evolved to focus mainly on friendship skills.

Sticking with the song, with its themes of love and friendship as a hook for the pupils, she used the award money to bring in Razz to expand on the ideas in exercises with year 7 chil-

Resources on citizenship

● **BT** has produced an updated version of its citizenship materials on DVD -- Communication Skills for Young Citizens -- as part of its education programme. The resource material, which can also be downloaded along with a teachers' pack at www.btplc.com/education, now includes video clips of some of last year's award-winners as well as some inspirational ideas and activities to help schools get citizenship and communication projects off the ground. The DVD is free but schools will need to pay for postage and packing. More details are available on the website at: www.btplc.com/education/schoolsawards. Information about the BT Communication Skills Roadshow from CragRats can be found at: www.btplc.com/education

● **CitizED** is a major project supported by the Teacher Training Agency for citizenship and teacher education. The website contains extensive information, materials and resources organised by school phases (primary, secondary, post-16 and cross-curricular). www.citized.info

● **Citizens Connection** is a toolkit for active citizens across the UK. Hosted by Common Purpose, the website contains resources on campaigning, volunteering and how society works. www.justdosomething.net

● **Census at School** contains a wealth of ideas to motivate pupils. Pupil data from UK schools is exchanged with schools in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. www.censusatschool.ntu.ac.uk

dren, gifted and talented pupils and the learning support unit.

In one, the group is split into teams that have to negotiate their way through holes in a large rope spider's web. They're not competing, but the two sides have been given different time limits and, unless they talk to each other, they won't realise it. In an eight, the whole class lies on the floor tight together and one child has to roll over the line of bodies. In a third, one child leads the others around the room in a dance to music.

These trust exercises get the children to bond as a group, but it's about something more personal, too, says Razz.

"Children tend to see school as the same old thing, going along with the same peer group. One of our objectives at Whitley Abbey was to introduce the idea that friendship is something they can grow and promote."

If it all sounds a bit vague and New Age, Goodwin points out that staff and parents have all noted big improvements in the children's behaviour and their willingness to cooperate

with each other.

The children themselves are enthusiastic about the impact the work has had on them. "The tutor group is really good now, people are basically nicer to each other," says Ashok Jassi, 12. "People don't laugh at what you say any more, they listen, because that's what we do in Council, and I feel happier in class."

Natallie Barnes, 15, and a member of the gifted and talented group, says the work has encouraged her to join the school's peer mentoring scheme, helping younger children susceptible to bullying.

"It didn't have the courage before but the work has helped us to learn different ways of building trust so it's easier to communicate with the younger children," she says. "It's also given me the confidence to speak up for myself, regardless of what other people think."

Julie Nightingale

Details of Robert Razz's work can be found at www.RGlobalWorks.com