



Exploring aspirations and strength of character:

An account of practice from collaborative action research in Fairisle Infant and Nursery

The Research-Practice Partnership

The **School Voices Research-Practice Partnership** aims to support schools in **responding to student diversity** and **improving learning outcomes** for all, whilst at the same time **promoting inclusion**. This will be achieved by focusing on **students' voices and dialogues** between teachers and children and young people through **participatory research approaches**.

The Partnership has been partly funded by **UKRI – Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF)**. The Partnership consists of a collaboration between: **University of Southampton** and three **hub schools (St John's Primary and Nursery School, St Mary's CE Primary School, Redbridge Primary School)** that were involved in an earlier pilot study. The hub schools and the University of Southampton support other schools in introducing these ideas through collaborative action research, considering the complexities within each school context. For more information - www.schoolvoices.soton.ac.uk

The school

Fairisle Infant and Nursery School, guided by the mission of 'Expect success,' is committed to promoting excellence and inclusion in education within Southampton's Lordshill District Centre. The school accommodates over 300 pupils aged 2-7 across 11 classes, including Nursery through to Year 2. Serving a diverse community, 30% of students speak English as an additional language, with representation from 27 different languages. Additionally, 32.3% of pupils have Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND), 12 have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), and there are around 84 students with Individualised Educational Plans (IEPs). Fairisle consists of the senior leadership team, 15 teachers, and 30 support staff including Nursery, and has been part of the Bridge Education Trust since March 2023.

Core values such as mental health, positive relationships, collaboration, creativity, and empowerment are integral to Fairisle's approach. The school employs varied teaching methods and utilises ICT (Information and Communications Technology) to actively engage students in practical learning experiences, fostering a caring ethos alongside high expectations for pupils. The school also emphasises staff well-being, engages families in school life, and promotes community involvement seeking to make a positive impact within the community.

Research focus and process

This is the second year for Fairisle participating in the School Voices RPP. The headteacher and one Year 1 class teacher were involved in the work this year, working on the key focus with different

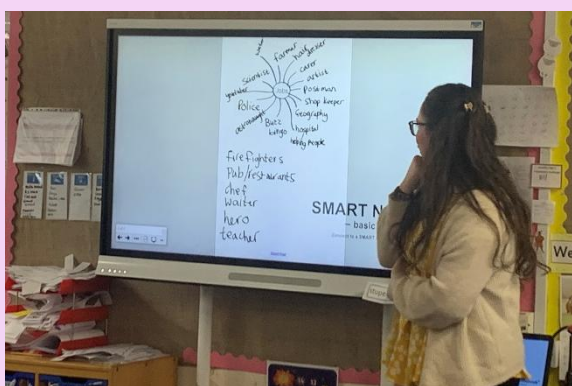
research questions. Focusing on a child's personal development, believing that in this way they can set them up to succeed both in their education and crucially in life, their key topic was: **Promoting children's character development to prepare them to be global citizens** – to be their best and aspire to be extraordinary.

A. Historical Figures Project

Led by the Year 1 teacher, she took a history route to explore the following research question:

- **Can historical figures influence the ambitions and aspirations of young learners?**

Year 1 children in this class had a session discussing what a job is and the jobs students want to do in the future, starting from what the children already knew about jobs. Students drew the jobs they wanted to do when they grow up, discussing the importance of each job. Then they used the Diamond 9 activity, ranking different jobs according to their importance. After that, the teacher brought up and linked them to significant historical figures that they've learnt about, to explore if any of these figures would be aspirational to them in new jobs. Then they completed the Diamond 9 activity again.



A mind map of jobs in Year 1.

B. "Strength of Character" Project

Led by the headteacher, this project's focus was on personal development and looking at the strength of character.

After she explained to all Year 2 students what the project would be about, 60 students expressed

their interest in becoming **"change makers"**, an approach that she used the previous year as well. The headteacher mixed children from different classes and created three groups of 20 "change makers". The research question that the school developed was:

- **Can exploring "strength of character" bring about an improved sense of connection and belonging?**

The headteacher carried out the same sessions, with each group of 20 "change makers". Firstly, she introduced words like compassion, humility, justice, and empathy. This linked with the school's focus on 'big words' being a word-aware school. Then they used the Diamond 9 activity, using nine-word strips. After that, she read out *The Word Collector* story and discussed it with each group. Then they looked at the front covers of four books: *If I Were Prime Minister*, *Be Kind*, *No Money Day*, and *The Friendship Bench* and discussed what the story may be about. Then students in each of the groups went through the democratic process of voting which books they wanted to read and be involved with.



Discussing nine "big words" in Year 2.

Participatory methods

Drawing

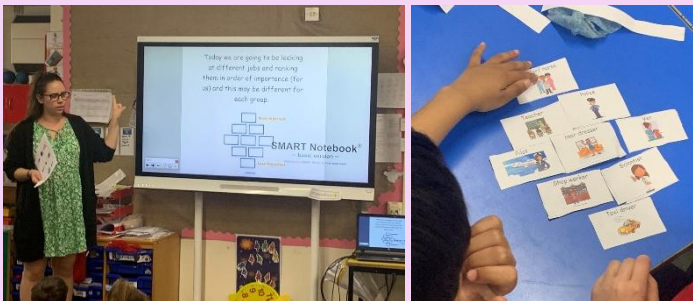
In the Year 1 class, every child drew the job they would like to do in the future in an empty figure. They drew images such as a scientist, doctor, astronaut, police officer, Youtuber, carer, ballerina, etc.



Year 1 students drawing the jobs they wanted to do

Diamond nine

According to the jobs drawn by Year 1 students, the teacher organised the whole class in small groups, to complete the Diamond 9 activity. This involved them having to choose nine jobs written on cards and organising them in the shape of a diamond, ranking them from what they considered to be the most important jobs to what they considered to be the least important. The teacher was asking them to justify their decisions and wrote down their choices and reasons on stickers. This activity was used as the baseline of their ideas.



Year 1 students doing Diamond 9 activities.

In Year 2, the headteacher introduced nine “big words”, then students worked in small groups to rank these in the shape of a Diamond . The nine statements on strips were:

- Caring – Compassionate
- Strong – Resilient
- Honest - Courageous
- Keeps trying - Perseverance
- Helpful – Encouraging
- Forgiving - Humility
- Kind – Empathy
- Wise – Curious
- Fair - Justice

Guessing with sticky notes

The head teacher showed four covers of books, introducing them one after the other, to Year 2 “change makers”. She then invited students to write down their guesses about each book based on the title, words, colours, and other clues on the cover. She asked questions such as: “Looking at this front cover, what does it tell me? What do I think I know? Do the pictures give you clues? Do the colours or the author give you any clues? There's no right or wrong. ” Each student wrote down on a sticky note their ideas.



Sticky notes by Year 2 students

Voting

Year 2 “change makers” had to vote which of the four books wanted to be read out to them, which linked with the voting right as an adult. They were given four coloured lollipop sticks and were asked to place them in one or more of four boxes each displaying a different book cover. She emphasised that the colour of the sticks was irrelevant. Pupils were asked to base their choice solely on the front covers and their own thoughts, with the most-voted book to be read next. Following the reading, they would work as “change makers” to create positive changes in their home, school, community, or the wider world.



Year 2 students were voting their favourite book cover.

At the end, all students sat together on the carpet. The headteacher asked about their feelings about voting, “So, thumbs up if you thought that was easy to vote.” Many of them thumbed up, and she asked them why. Also, some students thought that it was challenging because “It’s hard to choose”.

Outcomes

Thinking about purpose of jobs: One of the key activities involved children designing themselves in the jobs they would like to do in the future. The project helped pupils to begin thinking about purpose, empathy, and how they might contribute positively to society through jobs. It was particularly encouraging to see that many children changed their ideas from the initial baseline, showing thoughtful reflection and growth in their thinking over time.

Achieving change: In Year 2, each group of “change makers” selected a different story to read following the voting process. This story then became the starting point for changing actions.

- One group decided to create motivational cards, inspired by the message of their story, to encourage others to stay positive and believe in themselves.
- Another group focused on the friendship bench, recognising its importance within the school and suggesting ways to improve it by adding points of interest such as items found in nature or a photograph.
- A third group proposed setting up a mindfulness reading area, aiming to provide a calm and reflective space for pupils.

Key ideas emerging

Enabling all children to participate through participatory approaches: In Year 1 the whole class was involved through participatory approaches, which allowed all children to think about the various jobs and how these can positively contribute to society in different ways.

Promoting children’s personal development and preparing them to be global citizens: Children in

Year 1 rethought the purpose of jobs and the ideas of contributing meaningfully to society. Year 2 pupils acted as “Change Makers”, making decisions that had a meaningful impact on aspects of school life, such as creating motivational cards, enhancing the friendship bench, and proposing a mindfulness reading area. Such actions enabled children to experience first hand how they can have a positive impact in their school and allowed them to think how they can be future global citizens.

Teachers’ thoughts

So what I found welcoming was that the children who had less confidence wanted to use their voice for positive change. This was encouraging as they really shone – a very empowering environment that demonstrated connection and belonging!

Headteacher

At the end of the process, they had more jobs that they thought they could achieve when they were older compared to initially. So I thought it was really nice to see the influence that historical figures had.

Year 1 teacher

Teacher team

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Headteacher: Juliette Owens

Research team

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We would also like to acknowledge the participation of many children and other staff in the school who have contributed in various ways.