

Birdwell Primary School, North Somerset - 7 October 2008

There was uproar at the debriefing session at the end of the Lesson on Vikings. The year 4s were not happy about what had happened to their longboats. Their teacher, though, was not fazed - the response was what she'd expected, and it was meant to be part of the learning. At Birdwell primary in North Somerset lessons in any subject have both academic and social objectives. For the Viking session, the children had been told the academic objective was learning to write instructions to build longboats. Groups of children chose their own social objectives, such as resolving conflict.

Birdwell is one of some 50 schools in the county to have had teachers trained in "Critical Skills", a US programme that "has transformed pedagogy", says Andrea Sully, North Somerset learning research and development officer. Its values are such that the schools have formed a community around the theme. The Birdwell pupils wrote out their instructions for longboat construction and set to work. But 20 minutes later, the teacher asked for a "quality audience" - a request that can be made by anyone in the school, child or adult, when they think something needs to be discussed. Reminding them of the learning outcome (instruction writing), she asked each group to move clockwise to the next table, and resume building their neighbor's boat. Unsurprisingly, the crafts were not seaworthy, and the children had several things to reflect on. One was how they would have to write more accurate instructions next time round, and another was how it felt not to be allowed to finish their own boat. Birdwell's Headteacher.

Nick Shopland, says the school community is built on respect and equality. A Lesson like the Viking longboats work because of the relationships between children and teachers. This ethos also means children feel comfortable talking about their lives in daily "check-in" sessions, and, for those needing extra support, small-group activities with special needs coordinator Sarah Dalwood. In the "check-in" each child says

good morning by name to the boy or girl on either side and then says something about how they are feeling. This greeting can be particularly important on a Monday morning for a child to whom hardly anyone has spoken to all weekend.



When there is respect and trust, a child could talk, for example, about how a family night out had ended up with his dad in prison for assault. Shopland says. "Then, the community draws around that person." Children are free to pass when it's their turn to speak. This ethos at least gives the child a chance of being able to learn that day.

"You can't take children away from their settings, but you can give them the mental tools to go outside them," says Shopland DH