

# Building understanding, sharing identities

*Rebecca Kennedy*

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This is a chapter from the UKLA publication *Literacy and Community: developing a primary curriculum through partnerships*. It describes how a class teacher and a literacy consultant in a multilingual school in Birmingham developed a teaching sequence to explore identity and citizenship. The teacher, Katie Palmer, is now Deputy Head Teacher and Curriculum and Assessment Leader, and the school now has 356 children on roll. The book *Literacy and Community* invites readers to reflect on their own practice and the chapter ends with some prompt questions.

If you find this article interesting, why not look in the UKLA bookshop for *Literacy and Community* for examples of partnerships with homes, parents and communities throughout the primary age range.

## Context

Yardley Wood community primary school is a one form entry school of 220 children in the south of Birmingham. The number of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) is more than three times the national average with the proportion of children with English as an additional language close to national average. School leaders are working to establish the school at the heart of its local community and there are new opportunities for family learning.

As part of a local authority curriculum development network, the senior leadership team had identified the following aims for curriculum design:

- to develop enthusiasm for learning and motivation to learn
- to provide an exciting curriculum linked to the community
- to raise standards in literacy.

This project was designed to explore children's identity with the hope of engaging family members to participate in the children's learning. They also wanted to develop a more cohesive curriculum by expanding opportunities to write in different subject areas.

## Starting points

Katie Palmer is curriculum development leader and the year 5 teacher. For this project she worked alongside Rebecca Kennedy, a consultant, to develop a three week teaching sequence focusing on finding practical ways of implementing the school's aims for curriculum design. They wanted to develop opportunities to write across subjects and investigate curriculum planning with consideration to time, place, people and pedagogies. They also wanted to enthuse reluctant writers. The purpose of the teaching sequence was to explore what is meant by identity with an emphasis on citizenship, literacy and creativity. The outcome was an information text about themselves.

## 'I can very much see what kind of person they are.'

Katie began the unit of work by sharing several images of a famous personality. The class considered how he differed in the photographs, and the assumptions they made about his identity in different contexts. She explained that the children would be investigating how their own identities were shaped by the different circumstances of their lives - exploring their family history, their relationships with others and their connections to the community. They would investigate how these contributed to their sense of self, help shape their personalities and impact on how they perceive themselves.

### Diandra

*Baby holder*  
*Dummy sucker*  
*The sensible one*  
*Outside adventure*  
*Smiling one*

### Jessica

*Fit netballer*  
*Oldest classmate*  
*Kind supporter*  
*Hard worker*  
*Fast writer*

Teacher and children brought in photographs of themselves from home. Katie knew that in order to gain children's confidence she needed to trust them with information about her own family. All photographs were shared, promoting genuine interest and informative talk; children recounted the time when images were taken and explained aspects of their lives. Following this, the children considered descriptions for their images and wrote kennings reflecting their thoughts.

The kennings demonstrated that the children were considering the different roles they inhabit. Diandra's kenning 'The sensible one' refers to a photograph of her with her siblings. Jessica considered different attributes that she feels she has: 'Hard worker, fast writer, kind supporter'. Responses were personal, linked to the photographs they had selected to share with the class.

Photographic artwork created by Birmingham born artist, Gillian Wearing for her series, 'Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say' 1992-3 were shared with the children. Wearing's work (Figures 1 and 2) focuses on discovering details about individuals and the artist has said:

*When I look at how people use brands I often think how we use them to tell the public world a story about who we are: or rather how we wish to be perceived by others. They are a way of protecting our private selves from disclosure.*

*Figures 1 and 2: Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say by Gillian Wearing, courtesy Maureen Paley, London*



The class explored the images, considering how they present the difference between public and personal personas. They discussed the complexity of their own identities and feelings, through rich exploratory talk: looking at others' perspectives, trying out new possibilities and forming opinions. Following this conversational journey, children were encouraged to create their own image in the style of Gillian Wearing. Teachers, parents, teaching assistants and even the new headteacher participated and a collage was created and displayed in the classroom.

Class teacher: *I'm learning it's ok not to be perfect at everything.*

Parent/ TA: *Overworked and underpaid.*

Girl: *Give support to my father in hospital.*

Boy: *I want more responsibility.*

Boy: *Helping other people makes me happy.*

Boy: *I want my grandad to be happy not sad.*

Boy: *Share peace with the rest of the world.*

Girl: *Give people peace.*

*Then they were not just talking about themselves, there was an awareness of cross over, we were talking about community. The children began to see how our lives overlap, they mix and match.*

Some of the pupils' responses were personal, linked to their first hand experiences; others demonstrated concerns about the wider world. The portraits were seen as a communication of themselves, disclosing aspects of the children's personality. All of the responses were open, exposing thoughts and opinions which the children felt confident enough to share. The class and teacher were becoming partners in their learning; showing interest in and asking questions of each other and beginning to articulate the different layers to personality, not always visible to others.

During the next sessions children considered their daily lives in more detail. Katie wanted them to think about the places and people and how they contribute to who they are. Using world maps, the class placed artefacts, foods and images on the countries they were from. They then annotated the maps with examples of language from different parts of the world (Figure 4). The activity encouraged discussion about immigration and changing populations. Children began to ask themselves questions about what their lives might have been like if they had been born in different parts of the world: schools they might

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have gone to, houses they might have lived in. During these discussions, the teacher drew on the experience of pupils who had emigrated and they shared how their lives had changed.



Figure 3: World map activity

In order to consider the people, places, experiences and belongings that are important to them the teacher introduced a concentric circular diagram. Children placed themselves in the centre and things that were important to them in the outer circles in decreasing value.

Kaylie has named her family and home as most important (Figure 5). Grandparents, school, friends and money appear in the second circle. As the circles move away from the centre newer friends, food and members of the extended family are included. Kaylie's step family are also further away from the centre. Local community amenities such as the pizza shop, doctors, dentist are identified - the pizza shop is considered more important than the doctors!

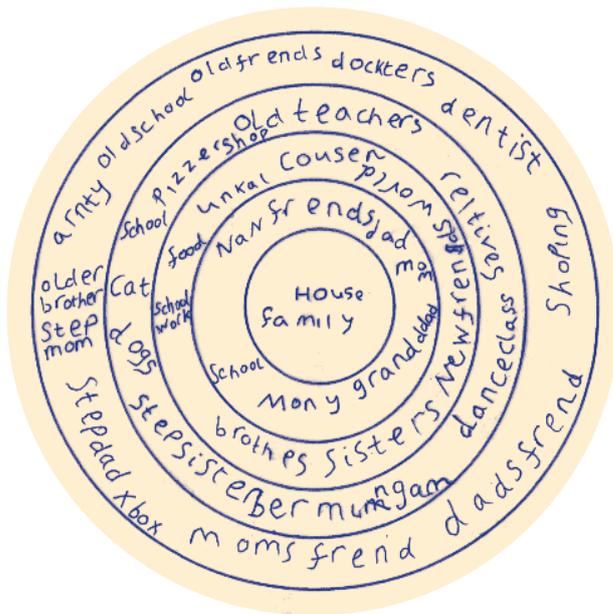


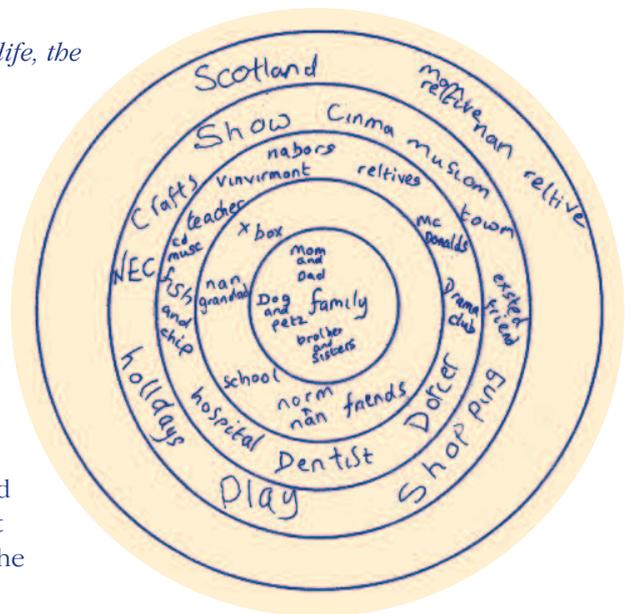
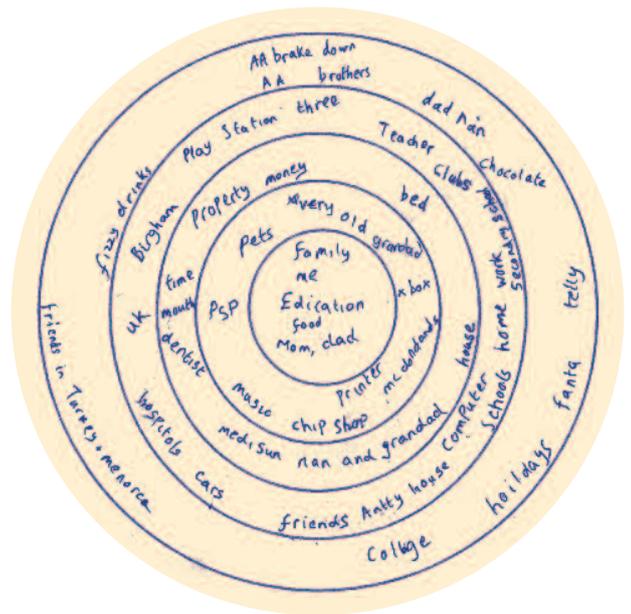
Figure 4 Kaylie's diagram: exploring aspects of her life, the people and places in it

Figure 5 Thomas' diagram

Figure 6 Anya's diagram

Thomas cites his parents, food and education as being most important to him (Figure 6). In the next circle he names fast food places, pets, PSP, Xbox, music and a favourite grandfather: 'very old granddad'. Thomas has also included favourite foods and places: Aunt's house, Birmingham, friends in Turkey and Menorca.

Anya identifies her family, mum and dad, siblings and pets as being most important to her (Figure 7). Next come friends, grandparents, school and her Xbox. She



considers places in the next circle: McDonald's, the fish and chip shop, being part of the school drama club and other relatives. Her diagram combines family, friends, pets, belongings and the local community.

These diagrams enabled the children to consider the roles people, places and interests play in their day to day lives. They were beginning to think about the place of others in helping to shape and influence their identity and how these aspects interacted. The diagrams also demonstrated the complex nature of the family as many referred to the value placed on the relationships in step families.

Following on from this, identity mind maps allowed the children to further explore how their identity is shaped and influenced by family and those around them. The class discussed how people influence others through their genetic features, personalities and interests:

Kaylie: *I have hair like Aunty Jo when she was little.*

Diandra: *I like Take That because of my Aunty Louise.*

Hussain: *I speak Urdu because of my mum and I have my dad's nose.*

Aimee: *I'm named after someone in a film.*

Views of the family unit influenced contributions during this activity. A number of children were from one parent families, being raised by their mothers and this influenced their expectations for their own futures and family lives.

### **'I wanted parents and children to have one to one time to discuss their family and their lives.'**

The concept of family trees was introduced through the use of BBC's *Who do you think you are?* programme and a website about a local family who have lived in the community since the 1800s. One child had recently suffered a bereavement. In sensitivity to this, Katie visited the family to discuss how best to approach the project. Parents and carers were invited into the classroom to enrich discussions and share family histories. Several of the parents took the opportunity to work with their children constructing family trees.

*A grandmother  
bought in bags  
and bags  
of things.*

The workshop encouraged families to talk to each other, providing a learning experience that was real. Children were fascinated by each other's photographs and memories and this allowed opportunities to listen, share, respond to and question their peers.

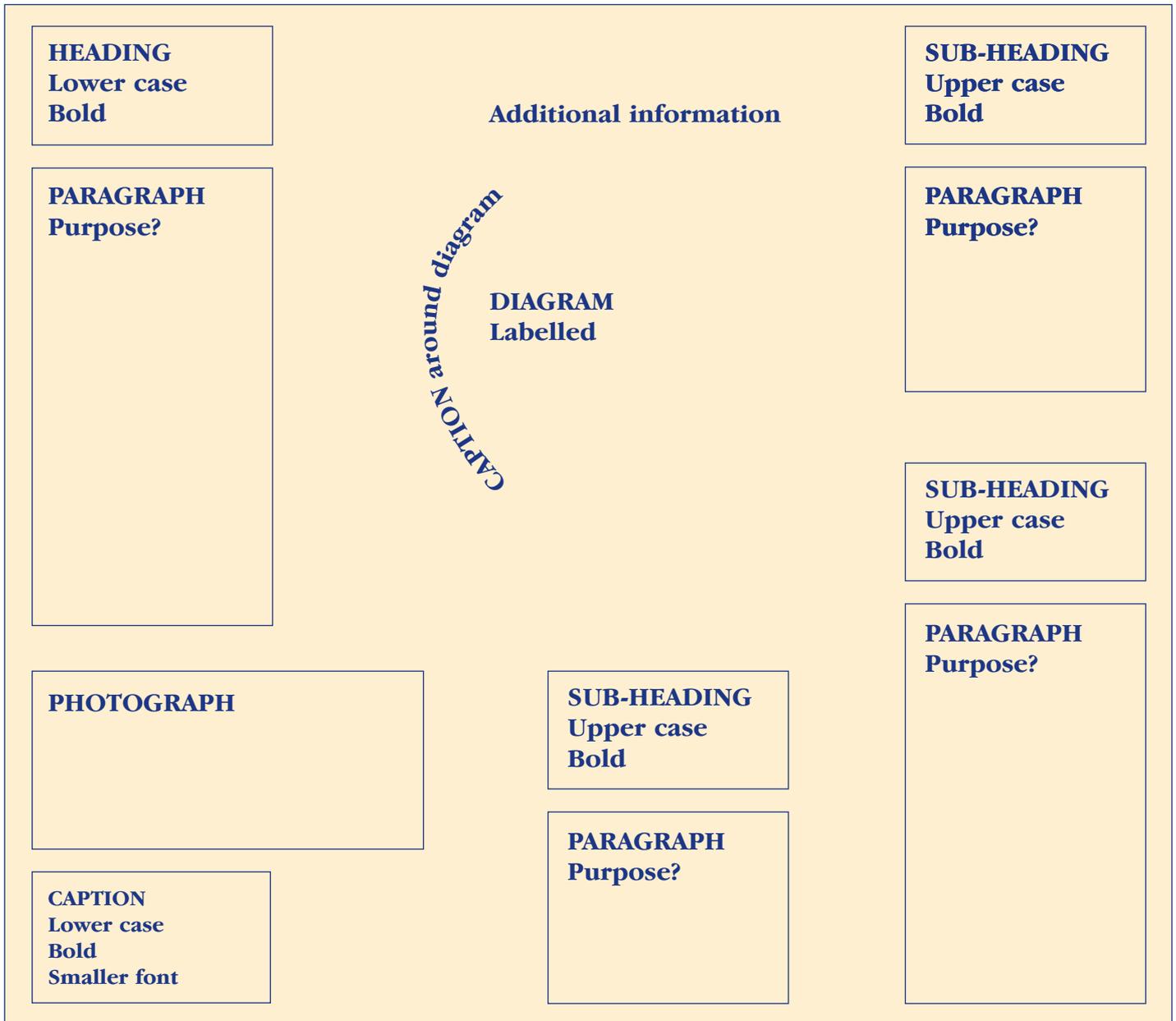
A relationship of greater respect and trust was developing between the members of the class. The children felt comfortable to explore themselves. In opening up they became vulnerable but trusted that the classroom was a place of security to share or withhold information as they chose.

### **'Each piece is unique to the child. It is their identity and how they see themselves. It's what they value the most.'**

In preparation for writing, children worked to explore the design and composition of paper based information texts. In groups they analysed texts with a focus on design: layout, use of images and typographical features. They were encouraged to formulate personal responses to non-fiction. Children created writing frames based on double page spreads, deconstructing multimodal texts (Figure 8). After reading several non-chronological reports, the class worked to identify language features and discussed aspects of style and tone. They used these experiences and models to consider what makes successful report texts.

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Above: Figure 7 An example of a writing frame based on a double page spread from a children's information text

The children used digital equipment to take photographs to accompany their multimodal texts. They were given freedom to select information from both their own experience and earlier activities to create frames for their reports. They identified sections, information and layout of their final compositions. Katie used modelled and shared approaches to support the writing. Throughout the composition process the children were encouraged to return to their writing, editing and redrafting of their work.

**'Every individual reflected on their identities - what made them who they are.'**

*I hardly ever have to step in - in terms of conflict or an issue... this is down to acceptance. That is what they've developed through this, an acceptance.*

Following the project Katie reflected: 'they got a lot from having others to cement and share their experiences.' The project enabled the children to understand the complex nature of identity. They valued learning about themselves and others and shared private aspects of their lives with confidence. This had an impact on their self-esteem and enthusiasm for learning. Teacher, adults and children were partners in learning and there was an ethos of understanding and collaboration. By encouraging independence and choice in the final written outcome the teacher provided opportunities for the children's voices to be heard.

*It got them to consider their lives, identities and who they are.*

One of the school's aims is to develop a meaningful curriculum. By engaging parents and linking the children's home and school lives, Katie showed the young people that their identities, experiences, knowledges and artefacts are valued in school. She used a range of different approaches to make connections so that the learning was authentic. In doing so she was able link the school curriculum to the children's everyday lives and the local community.

### 'We are a changing school'

As a development of the project, Katie has worked with a small team to explore how pedagogies and practices can be further developed across the school. They have planned and taught teaching sequences which endeavour to link the children's home lives and local community to curriculum requirements and link literacy to other areas, providing opportunities to develop talk and writing skills. The literacy subject leader is closely involved in these developments to ensure talk, reading and writing is effectively and meaningfully integrated in all learning.

*If I hadn't backed off, I'd have missed the point. We've evaluated every step of the way, the importance of family, of family history, of the community.*

Raising attainment in literacy and developing purposeful opportunities to write is central to the school's improvement plan. Year 5's non-chronological reports reveal the sense of purpose for writing. By giving the children choice, the teacher motivated the writers who chose to share different aspects of themselves with their readers. Chanai drew on the parent workshop and chose to write about her family tree:

*They have thought about it... what's left is what they value, the honesty, the discussions.*

*A huge percentage of my family come from Jamaica; they all originate from different parts of Jamaica such as: Kingston, St Elizabeth and Port-Antonio. My great-grandparents were Thomas and Maisie M... (my granddad's parents) and Robert and Isilda H... (my Nan's parents). My Nan and granddad called Clifton (Cliff for short) and Verona M... Some of my family live in America, Spain, Jamaica or England. Most of them come from my father's side. Despite having loads of family I hardly ever see most of them. If my grandparents hadn't moved to England in the 1930s to find work my family would probably never have been here.*

She also includes a section on her hobbies, accompanied by images:

*In my spare time (which I have a lot of usually) I like to either pick up a book and read it until I'm supposed to do something else or ask for my DS or laptop. When I feel like it I play on the Wii. I only got into acting and singing in my extra time when I started doing drama club on Saturdays with people I know.*

In one paragraph, Hussain also describes his hobbies:

*I am Hussain and I like playing football and playing police games in the garden or elsewhere. I like getting creative at home by drawing; my favourite subject is drawing cars. I have made a big play site out of a small piece of cardboard and a big piece of cardboard. It has come out amazingly and it's great fun to play on. I'm also a cricket fan and have got a great cricket bat to play with my brother in the garden.*

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Taylor has chosen to write a section describing her relationship with her dad:

*To me my dad is really special. He likes to give me as much money as he can. He's very nice and we love each other very much. When we are together we spend time watching films and going to the park to play.*

Faiza describes her likes and dislikes:

*I have a very bad habit of biting my nails and I'm trying to stop. I love to spend time with my family and friends. I also love my mum's curries with rice and chapati. I like McDonald's too but I hate vinegar and tomatoes. I'm also very competitive.*

The writing demonstrates that children have drawn on different aspects of the teaching sequence for their reports and have invited the reader into their lives, revealing their understanding of their own identity. As the teacher concludes: 'each piece is unique to the child. It is their identity and how they see themselves. It's what they value the most.'

### Conclusion

When planning the unit both Katie and Rebecca wanted to look for ways to be creative with time, place, people and pedagogies. The approaches chosen: using art, lots of talk, world maps and deconstruction of real texts developed the children's confidence to share and explore as they collaborated with and learnt from each other. The teacher took risks and tried approaches that were unfamiliar: learning took place in a range of locations and involved different people. Lessons did not always sit neatly into a subject specific box, for example literacy or art. The children's oral and written work was shared with real audiences and time for reflection and self-assessment was planned into the sessions. As a result Katie reflected that learners were more committed and independent.

### Acknowledgements

With thanks to Katie Palmer and year 5 of Yardley Wood community primary school.

Grateful thanks to Gillian Wearing and Maureen Paley, London, for permission to use images.

### Reflections

- How is your curriculum linked to the local community?
- How might you be more flexible with your use of time, place, people and teaching approaches?
- How might you bring out of school life experiences into the classroom?

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