

Art Based Support at Harlaw Academy, Aberdeen

*Tina Stockman explains how this initiative led her to become
an action researcher*

As a Guidance Teacher with some thirty years of experience behind me, facing the new millennium presented me with both challenges and fears. School exclusion was a hot issue and schools were agonising over methods of reducing their exclusion numbers. Guidance was experiencing yet another of its periodic 'shapeshifts' and moving towards a more impersonal, bureaucratic model. Somehow I felt the two were connected. The time I had formerly spent on intense, one-to-one support for disruptive or needy children was being either eroded or re-directed. Exclusion rates were rising. I felt de-skilled and undervalued.

With my professional interests - Guidance, Media Studies and Art - and alternatives to exclusion in mind, I presented Head Teacher, John Murray with an Arts based scheme, ABBS (Arts Based Behaviour Support). He was encouraging and asked me to develop the idea further and present him with a plan. However, he stipulated that any curricular modifications would have to be in addition to, rather than instead of, my existing post. I duly performed my part (creative-pie-in-the-sky academic) and he performed his (creative-but-down-to-earth school manager).

The scheme was targeted at S2 pupils, taking into account their behaviour, attendance and progress in S1. Six pupils were selected by a committee made up of the Head Teacher, Year Head, Guidance Staff, PT Support for Learning and the Educational Psychologist. We found that the 'group mix' was essential for the success of the initiative and care was taken to ensure that the group was suitably diverse in terms of needs and gender. It was known from previous experience that a 'bad' boys group did not work. The dominant members fought with one another and the less aggressive stopped attending. Although the scheme was devised primarily to provide alternative strategies for pupils at risk of exclusion, we thought it advisable to include those possessing a poor attendance record or victims of bullying. The magic formula for the group was, 'two sad, two mad and two bad.'

Once parental permissions were obtained, the parents were invited to attend a social evening hosted by the Headmaster. This provided an opportunity to clarify the aims of the scheme as well as giving parents a chance to voice any anxieties and concerns. Regular parental contact has become a fixed feature of ABBS.

ABBS activities take place on Friday afternoons outwith the school environment and are provided by local arts professionals. I go with the pupils to the various venues, usually accompanied by another educational professional and a senior pupil. We all participate in the activities as far as age, health and ability permits. After the afternoon's session, the participants, including teachers and tutors meet for a cup of tea to discuss the activities or to put this so-o-o unfair world to rights! In 2002, Harlaw Academy's Arts Based Behaviour Support scheme received one of the first Scottish Education Awards for, 'New Ideas in Education'.

ABBS has continued to evolve and develop in scope and depth. Indeed it is no longer known as Arts Based Behaviour Support. Including the word 'behaviour' led to numerous misconceptions on the part of pupils, teachers and parents. Pupils approached me asking how bad they had to be to attend ABBS. Timid pupils queried their selection as they did not see their behaviour as problematic. Some staff questioned 'rewarding' disruptive pupils. A few parents were concerned that their child might acquire a negative reputation. To ease these problems and to avoid any chance of pupils being stigmatised, we decided to change the name to ABS (Arts Based Support).

Finding partners is a pleasurable, if nerve-wracking, aspect of the initiative. In the early days I would steel myself to pick up the phone and 'sell' the idea of working with troubled youngsters to total strangers. Fortunately, I have built up a network of loyal and talented practitioners who are sympathetic to the aims of ABS and make the pupils feel welcome. Exciting and imaginative projects have been offered by a host of local providers. This year, the following providers have supported ABS:

- Paul Foy, Education Officer at The Belmont cinema (film-making and editing programme)

- Cate Macpherson, Education Manager at His Majesty's Theatre (theatre skills and confidence building exercises)
- John Wilson of JB Hairshops (hairdressing skills).

Over the years, the groups have worked with Whitespace, City Moves, Aberdeen Art Gallery, Marischal Anthropological Museum, RGU Forensic Department, Grampian Police, University of Aberdeen and Peacock Printmakers to name but a few.

Whitespace, under the directorship of Lesley Thompson, has regularly provided the pupils with inspiring projects. I remember a notable venture with Helen Partridge, a sculptress whose work graces a number of local establishments including the glass and metal sculpture on permanent display in Harlaw Academy's entrance hall. The theme of the sculpture is the children themselves and a number of casting and photographic techniques were used. The pupils found making moulds of their own heads very intriguing. Helen used a harmless substance, blue dental alginate, to create the mould which was then used in the glass casting process. The sculpture is most impressive and the pupils clearly thought that it was worth the price of attending school with what appeared to be bright blue dandruff. ABS' adventures with Helen over the years really deserve a space to themselves as all of them are spectacular, beautiful and *weird!*

Another Whitespace project, co-ordinated by Chris Ganley, Community Arts Development Officer, found ABS paired with archaeologists excavating on a local dig. An enduring image is a child rushing towards me clutching what she assumed to be a chicken bone. It was a human toe. This same project had the pupils taking part in a Crime Scene simulation in The Robert Gordon's University forensic department. They were duly kitted out with white paper suits and rubber gloves. It was all terribly Silent Witness! To their delight, they were allowed to keep the paper suits. Nobody had actually said they should keep the suits on and I was obliged to walk through town and take tea with six human meringues looking as if they had just escaped a kidnap attempt or were about to be lobotomised. After about an hour of this public display, one child turned to me and said, "we look like prats, don't we?" I could only agree.

Along the way, ABS has gathered a variety of volunteer helpers from teaching auxiliaries, former PT Maths, trainee Educational Psychologists and once, in a single session, a pupil's mother, grandmother and great grandmother! The social skills aspect has expanded and the pupils' ability to show courtesy, tact, honesty and teamwork shares an equal place with their ability to handle technology, improvise a play or create an end product. As with many school initiatives, success depends not only on the enthusiasm and imagination of a single teacher but also on the encouragement and support of the Head Teacher and the school staff. This has been much in evidence at Harlaw Academy where John Murray has been ready to support experimental curricular techniques. ABS is not my exclusive property – indeed it could not function if it were - and a large part of its success can be attributed to its broad ownership.

ABS has been running long enough for the school to witness the pupil gains. For most there is an observable increase in self esteem and confidence as well as measurable improvements in attendance, academic performance and behaviour. The whole initiative is so positive and optimistic that it also has a beneficial effect on the contributing adults.

So, a year or two ago, feeling rather smug, I was more than happy to discuss ABS with a visiting school inspector. He showed appropriate interest and paid some sincere compliments both to the school and to me. He then asked a series of disconcerting questions:

- What were the precise pupil selection criteria?
- How did we identify pupil gains?
- How did we measure success?
- What were the implications for other schools?

He made it clear that he was not denigrating the work but highlighting areas for improvement. Grudgingly, I had to admit he was right - but how was I going to address these issues? I did not want to juggle with boring and unwieldy assessment tools or involve myself and others in additional administrative duties.

While searching the University of Aberdeen website in September 2007, I chanced upon details of the Scottish Teachers for a New Era (STNE) scholarship scheme. STNE is a partnership initiative linking the University of Aberdeen and local authorities in the North and North -East of Scotland (Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Highland, Moray, Orkney and Shetland). It is funded by the Scottish Executive, the Tom Hunter Foundation and the University of Aberdeen. The scheme is modelled on similar initiatives in America and Canada where it has resulted in a productive information exchange between a broad range of educationalists and ultimately led to positive changes in teacher education.

I felt I had found a solution to my dilemma. I would be able to subject my work to rigorous analysis and draw from it a general model of good practice. I applied for the introductory seminar immediately. The keynote speakers were Dr. Jim Parsons and Dr. Phil McRae from the University of Alberta, joint winners of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) Educational Research Award 2007 for their study, Celebrating School Improvement. Their presentations were clear, informative and, thank goodness, great fun! Years of experience with teacher action research projects had shown them that there were recurring themes vital to school improvement, namely,

- collaborative professional development
- project-based (problem solving) learning
- parental involvement
- collaborative leadership
- integrating technology into the curriculum
- school culture

As I thought about these themes, their application to my work became more apparent and I wondered how I might use them to construct a model of good practice. In the end there was nothing for it but to sign on the dotted line and become a fledgling teacher action researcher.

I have now committed myself to a programme of work for the best part of a year. During that time I will have to

- prepare an initial proposal indicating how the project will benefit pupils and how it might support pupil gains
- keep a record of evidence at each stage of the action research project
- produce a brief account of the final outcome
- attend sessions designed to provide formal and personal support
- attend sessions covering wider aspects of research
- present a final piece of work to an audience of colleagues and students.

With that schoolteacher mix of martyrdom and masochism, I am thoroughly enjoying this venture. It has forced me to look at my work critically and has exposed some structural flaws and presented more than a few new questions.

As the research findings come in, it has been interesting to note that they are not quite as I expected. The emergent model of good practice is more general and flexible than I had supposed and I am looking forward to analysing the data and writing up my final report. Thankfully, the brave band of teacher action researchers are not cut adrift and left to their own devices. Each participant is allocated a tutor and I have been lucky enough to be supported by one who is tolerant, conscientious and good humoured.

However, returning to ABS, the focus of my research, I find that its future is somewhat fragile. I had hoped to end this article in a glow of warm optimism but instead I find I have to adopt a darker tone expressing my disquiet, in these uncertain economic times, for alternative educational schemes which seek to help troubled children both in my own establishment and those of my colleagues.