



Primary Futures is a new initiative that brings literacy and numeracy to life and raises aspirations for primary school children. **Daniel Allen** reports

THE FUTURE SEEMS a long way off for most primary school children. The present is their priority and so getting a job, developing relevant skills and building a career are a long way ahead in their minds.

Making a connection between what they learn in primary school and the jobs they might one day pursue is not easy, particularly those from challenging backgrounds where local unemployment is high and horizons may be set low.

Primary Futures is intended to change that. Developed by the NAHT and the Education and Employers Taskforce (EET), the

initiative aims to raise the aspirations of primary age children. Those behind the scheme plan to do that by introducing children to the world of work through the eyes of volunteers who can show them how literacy and numeracy have opened doors to interesting and rewarding careers.

Nick Chambers, director of the EET, an independent charity set up five years ago to build effective partnerships between schools and employers, says Primary Futures grew out of discussions with primary head teachers about how the EET could offer support. He says: "A number of them mentioned that they

were keen to bring in volunteers from outside their immediate communities to give children the chance to meet people from a range of backgrounds. Depending on where you're located and the catchment area and so on, some schools find that much easier than others."

An existing EET scheme that links schools with people in work, called Inspiring the Future, is aimed at secondary students. But, says Nick, discussions with primary school leaders identified a need to broaden the programme and to start earlier.

"We find that even at a very early age, some young people begin to rule out options. We want to help children keep their options open for as long as possible," he says.

NAHT general secretary Russell Hobby backs that aim. "We need to give our children and young people a vision of the opportunities available to them, so that they understand the value of learning and in doing so raise expectations," he

→ How it works

Once a school has registered on the Primary Futures website, teachers have access a growing network of volunteers from a wide range of professions who are at different stages of their careers. Having viewed volunteers' online profiles, the school can then send a message to any who match their requirements and invite them in to work with their children. When volunteers sign up they are asked whether they would be able to talk about why reading and numeracy have been so important in helping them achieve their current position.

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says. "It's never too soon to start this process."

Steve Iredale, the NAHT's immediate past president and a primary head teacher at Athersley South Primary in Barnsley, says Primary Futures is further evidence of NAHT's intent to lead the education agenda. The launch last year of an alternative school inspection programme, dubbed Instead, is another example. "With Instead we're trying to say to government, 'We can self-regulate, we don't need you. We can do this ourselves.'"

One of NAHT's strengths, Steve believes, is in trying to create other, similar models that encourage the profession to take ownership of the challenges it faces. And one of those challenges is the criticism from business leaders that young people are leaving school without the necessary skills to succeed in the workplace – which is where Inspiring the Future and Primary Futures can play an important role.

Steve is leading the NAHT project team that is piloting Primary Futures in 16 schools across England. "We're trying to link what children do in school to the world they will inherit one day. At the moment, they learn to develop their literacy and numeracy skills, but perhaps don't fully appreciate quite why they're doing it other than to help them get through exams."

Inviting volunteers into schools is, of course, nothing new. The difference with Primary Futures is that it aims to help children see a direct connection between what they do in school and what they could aspire to when they leave it. "We decided we were going to move away from the original reading partners model," says Steve, "to develop the link between literacy and numeracy skills and the world of work. Helping children to see that learning has real purpose is a central part of this project."

He says a major advantage of the programme is that through Inspiring the Future, the EET has already built an online mechanism designed to help connect schools and volunteers. ➔

➔ What can volunteers do?

The Primary Futures website suggests a number of activities that volunteers can engage in, including:

- explaining their jobs and enthusing children about the range of opportunities open to them and how important reading and numeracy were during their school days;
- discussing the different backgrounds and cultures they come from, helping to broaden children's horizons;
- reading with or listening to individuals or small groups, perhaps reading a passage from a favourite book;
- taking part in a numeracy activity; and
- acting as judges in projects and competitions such as enterprise or environment schemes.

➊ Broadening it for the benefit of primaries is relatively simple. “We don’t have to worry about any of the technical aspects. The big challenge for some schools is finding volunteers if you are in an area where there is high unemployment. Primary Futures can help to widen the search for volunteers.”

Where employment is hard to come by, schools that are keen to encourage pupils to start thinking earlier about work options may have little choice but to rely on the person who guides children across the road before and after school or the local shopkeeper.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” says Steve, “but we wanted to raise aspirations and find volunteers from a world the children had never heard of – chief executives of large companies to entrepreneurs who have started their own businesses, for example. That’s not being critical of this area because I’ve got tremendous respect for my community, but I want my children to see from volunteers that if they work really hard then other opportunities will open up.”

What the volunteers will actually do in schools will, to some extent, be determined by local need. Mike Wilson is head of Orrell Holgate Primary School in Wigan and secretary of the local NAHT branch. He is also a regional lead for Primary Futures. His first volunteer is a senior member of staff from a major hotel chain who has offered to come in to the school on a regular basis. “She’s done some voluntary work in a primary school near where she lives and with us she’ll do a session in the morning supporting some children with literacy and then some sessions on numeracy.”

Mike says he is “relatively well-blessed” in terms of volunteers he can choose from. One, an actuary, lives in London and is currently working in Geneva. Mike is working on the assumption that the young man has family connections in the north west because he has offered to do a one-off session at the school later in the year. The fact that a senior hotel employee and an actuary are among the people Mike can invite into his school, even at this early stage in the scheme, is indicative of the diverse range of volunteers Primary Futures can attract.

He insists that none of them will be thrown in at the deep end and left to sink or swim. All will work on specific programmes with selected individuals or in small groups. Success will be measured by taking soundings from staff, volunteers and the children – although hard evidence of a child’s improvement



in literacy and numeracy may be difficult to attribute directly to a single source such as an individual volunteer. As Mike points out, the teachers also “do quite a bit”.

He admits there are other reasons for inviting volunteers into his school. “For me it’s also about getting in as many people as possible who don’t normally visit schools so they can see what actually happens. Then, when they hear all the tripe that politicians give out about how rubbish we all are and not doing our jobs, they can think, ‘Actually, that’s not the case in the school I’ve been to’. Until people come in I don’t think they realise what the challenges involve.”

As a regional lead for Primary Futures, Mike is in a good position to gauge interest among other school leaders. He says that colleagues are already registering on the website ahead of the programme’s official launch in May – but he accepts that for others it may appear to be just more work. “Looking at it with a clinical eye, most head teachers’ major concern is Ofsted and where they are in relation to the next inspection. But talking to people one-to-one about Primary Futures, many have realised how easy it is to register.” Once they have signed up, schools can select volunteers by looking at their online profiles and messaging those who can offer what the school is looking for.

Nick Chambers confirms that even though the pilot stage is

still running, 200 or more primaries have found the Primary Futures resources online and begun using them. “We’ll get more detailed feedback from the pilots, which we can use to improve the system,” he says. But views are already coming in – and are very positive. “It shows the profession can develop its own scheme rather than having something developed by government and imposed on it, which we think is very encouraging,” says Nick. Based on the success of the pilots, the free scheme is already being rolled out across the UK.

In the meantime, Steve Iredale is looking forward to welcoming his first Primary Futures volunteers (see panel, right). From a list of about 25 volunteers, Steve says he got 17 responses within the hour when he asked if they would be interested in coming into his school. About half subsequently dropped out, saying they were more interested in careers work with children in secondary schools. But the rest, including a journalist and the head of a company employing thousands of people, were very keen.

“If we make it enjoyable and comfortable for the volunteers, they’ll get a lot from us,” says Steve. “I’m hoping to persuade them to come back and get more involved.” He wants Primary Futures to lead to longer-term relationships. “The key to that is how comfortable the volunteers feel – and how excited they are about it on the day. I’m getting a pretty good feel about it.”

As for measuring success, he says he will talk to the children before and after the sessions to see whether attitudes have changed. But he admits to a degree of weariness about trying to prove everything and gather the evidence. “Sometimes it’s something you can’t describe but you just see in a child that

➔ Feedback from the first pilot session at Barnsley’s Athersley South primary school

The children

The afternoon was amazing and I learned lots of new things. I never knew there was a job as a data journalist. I love maths, so maybe this could be for me. **Jack**

The afternoon was mind-blowing. It inspired me to become a journalist and to really work hard to improve my literacy. **Chloe-Mae**

The afternoon was really spectacular. I learned all about what the paramedics do and why I need good maths, reading and literacy skills. **Chloe**

The volunteers

I was delighted to help and thoroughly enjoyed meeting your children and some of the teachers. I was a little nervous, but they are a great bunch and helped put me at ease. I’m happy to help in the future in any way. **Jeff Hilton, global health and safety executive**

Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak at your school and for making me so welcome. I hope the children enjoyed my session - I certainly did. I told the kids that if they’d like to write up their stories and make a school newspaper, I’d love to see a copy, feed back and maybe work with them in the future. **Alex Curling, journalist**

Having the informal, though structured, discussion with the children enabled them to make their own links with the ‘real world’. It makes it clear to them that they aren’t just learning things to pass exams, they are skills that can and will be used in the future. We were really impressed with the children’s enthusiasm, energy and willing participation. Some of the questions they asked and the responses they gave to our questions were inspired and I hope that we got the message over about the importance of literacy and numeracy. We are going to drop in some patient report forms so that Miss Stanley can continue to work with the children in relation to neat writing and form filling. **Cath Cox and Matthew Hammonds, Yorkshire Ambulance Service**

The staff

The children were all left engaged and buzzing after the volunteers had shared their experiences and world of work. They were inspired to write news reports and wanted to be journalists for the day. They were able to quickly make the important link between what they learn in school and their futures. **Rachel Chambers**

A really worthwhile and valuable experience. The children were able to see the links between literacy and numeracy and real life work. **Jodie Stanley**

A thoroughly enjoyable afternoon. It made our children realise that school is all about what happens in their future and not just now. **Jayne Walton**

spark. You can’t quantify it and I know I can’t measure the damn thing, but I know they’ve got it. You see in children whether there’s a desire to get involved and find out more.”

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See also And Finally, page 50.