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Shakespeare 400 Pilot:

Addressing the Attainment Gap in Scotland using Textlab & the Classics

by

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ABSTRACT

The attainment gap is a key concern in current Scottish education policy. It is envisaged that the learning outcomes of an innovative collaborative project between the Department of English and School of Education at the University of Strathclyde may help redress some of the underlying concern associated with this phenomenon. The Shakespeare 400 project was designed to assist in addressing this gap, and through enhancements to pupil engagement in classic literacy, is aimed at contributing to a reversal of the substantial drop in Reading, Listening & Talking figures across transition stages (P7 – S2). Using known best practice regarding interdisciplinary approach and collaborative group work, its transformative and genre-based pedagogical approach in project activity begins with a fictitious 'crime' committed by one of Shakespeare's famous characters. Using their skills in literacy and technologies, pupils then must read, analyse and evaluate an anonymous confession note in order to identify the guilty party from amongst a bank of 'suspects'. This computer-based activity meets several Curriculum for Excellence learning outcomes in Literacy and Technologies, and can also encourage students to engage with their lessons outside of class. This paper will first locate the Shakespeare 400 project within current education policy and the curriculum, and then discuss the nature of the project itself and the feedback from its pilot study at a primary school in Glasgow.

1. CLOSING THE ATTAINMENT GAP

The National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education states two of its key priorities as "improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy" and "closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children."[1] It is envisaged that the learning outcomes of the Shakespeare 400 project can contribute to the achievement of these objectives in schools. The full description of the nature of the Shakespeare 400 activity can be found in section 4, but for now we will discuss its location in current education policy.

In their report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education', Edward Sosu and Sue Ellis of the University of Strathclyde detailed key strategies that were found to "have a positive impact on reducing the attainment gap."[2] One of these main strategies is "literacy instruction that has a meaningful and responsive learning mix of decoding, fluency, comprehension, engagement and digital literacy research skills."[3] These are all skills that the Shakespeare 400 project aims to deliver upon, due to its interdisciplinary nature, utilisation of Shakespeare's classic literature as a context, as well as immersing them in a challenging computer-based activity which encourages problem-solving, collaborative group work, research analysis, and evaluation of a different kind of language (Early Modern English). Thus, it is viewed that Shakespeare

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[1] The Scottish Government, *National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education*, (Edinburgh: The Scottish Government, 2016), p.7.
[2] E. Sosu, and S. Ellis, *Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education*, (York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014), p.23.
[3] ibid. p.23.

400 has real potential to deliver a meaningful positive impact on addressing the attainment gap, as it is deliberately designed to meet at least one of the key criteria for its redress as set out by Sosu and Ellis.

2. SCOTTISH SURVEY OF LITERACY AND NUMERACY (2014)

Together with broader assertion surrounding the attainment gap, there is also a known significant drop in the percentages of children doing well in Listening & Talking across the Primary/Secondary transition phase domestically, according to the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy in 2014. Here a dipping from 66% of children doing well in P7 to only 52% in S2 has been reported[4]. The Shakespeare 400 project activity was particularly designed with this transition phase in mind, and as such, aims to help reverse the drop in Listening & Talking skills by highlighting collaborative pedagogy in task, through pupils' small group working, independent self-regulated research analysis and interactive feeding back of their findings to the rest of the class at the end of the activity.

The SSLN also notes a drop in pupils performing well or very well in their reading, which declines from 88% in P7 to 80% in S2.[5] Again, the Shakespeare 400 materials' activity is designed to help address this drop, as it involves reading, analysing and evaluating a piece of classics writing. The

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[4] National Statistics, *Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) 2014 (Literacy),* (National Statistics, 2015), p.1.
[5] ibid.

activity specifically may be held to fit within the current curriculum as it covers the following codes in the Curriculum for Excellence:

Literacy: LIT 2-04a, LIT 2-05a, LIT 2-06a, LIT 2-07a, LIT 2-08a, LIT 2-14a, LIT 2-15a, LIT 2-16a, LIT 2-18a.[6]

Technologies: TCH 2-03a, TCH 2-03b, TCH 2-04a, TCH 2-08a.[7]

Furthermore, according to the SSLN, the transition from P7 to S2 also correlates to a significant drop in a pupil's likelihood to work outside the classroom. Here 47% of P7s state that they "hardly ever" do work outside of the classroom, and this number increases dramatically to 82% of pupils in S2[8]. Therefore, it is apparent that something can and should be done to encourage pupils across the transition phase to continue their engagement with school work outside of the classroom. It is also noted that over two-fifths of P7 pupils "responded very often to thinking things through and solving problems."[9] The engaging novelty value of exposure to Shakespeare's classics and relative interest in problem-solving noted amongst P7s highlights both the relevance and applicability of the Shakespeare 400 project activity, because of its primarily literature-based and problem-solving foundation. As the activity uses a piece of software that is openly accessible, the project has the potential for pupils to continue the activity at home, which can help to reverse the substantial drop in students' willingness to continue school work outside of class, particularly across the transition phase. There is also potential for this activity to eventually be available on tablets and other mobile

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[6] Education Scotland, *Curriculum for Excellence: Literacy,* (Scottish Government, 2004), pp.4-9.

[7] Education Scotland, *Curriculum for Excellence: Technologies,* (Scottish Government, 2004), pp. 4-6.

[8] National Statistics, *Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) 2014 (Literacy),* (National Statistics, 2015), p.36.

[9] ibid.

devices, making it even more portable, and keeping up with changing technological preferences amongst children, moving away from computers towards tablets and mobile phones.

3. SHAKESPEARE 400 PILOT

The Shakespeare 400 activity was developed as an offshoot of a Vertically Integrated Project (VIP) at the University of Strathclyde called TextLab, which uses computer-based research software to give detailed analyses of Shakespeare's plays. The Shakespeare 400 activity allows school pupils to use one of these computer programs, AntConc, to solve a fictitious crime committed by one of Shakespeare's characters. The scenario presented to the pupils is that an anonymous, but humorous, 'confession note' has been left at the 'crime scene' by one of Shakespeare's classic characters – who in this project, has taken on the guise of a 'prankster'. By carefully reading the note and picking out important language, the pupils can then use AntConc to match the author of the note to one of the key classic character 'suspects'. The potential for the creation of new scenarios and confession notes is limitless, therefore the activity can be repeated and the difficulty level can also be altered to suit different pupils and classes.

In the summer term of 2015-16 the project development team from the University of Strathclyde were invited to a primary school in Glasgow to pilot Shakespeare 400 materials and to conduct a small evaluative case study with a senior class and their teacher. The team incorporated the project

activity into a fifty-minute lesson which also included some background on Shakespeare, an introduction to four of his tragic heroes, and to his use of Early Modern English.

The evaluation results of the study were very positive, and the feedback from pupils sampled fell largely into two categories: those who felt the activity was enjoyable as it is, and those who enjoyed it but wished it could be extended, for example, by increasing the number of suspects and including more difficult Shakespearean language, which speaks to the engaging and enjoyable nature of the task.

Pupil Feedback

■ Change Aesthetic of Software	■ No Improvements	■ Extend Activity ■ Other
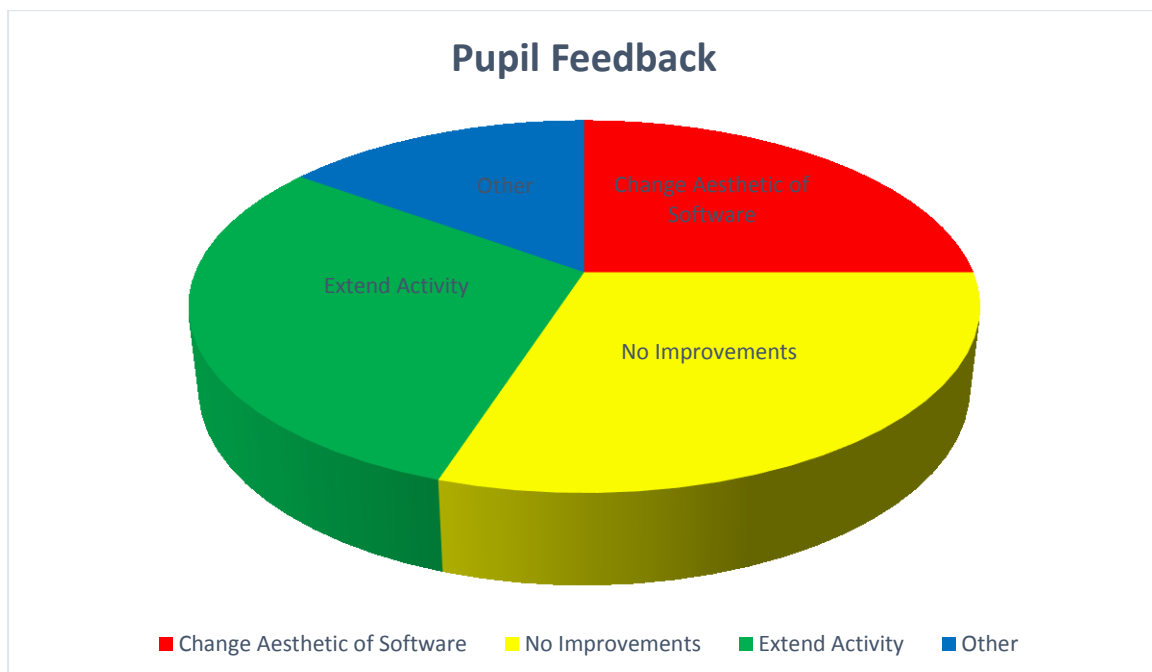
The Class Teacher (and Depute Head) involved also noted that the children were clearly engaged, and said they found the activity fun and enjoyed solving a mystery. Crucially, it was also adjudged that the pupils were developing their talking and listening skills by working collaboratively in pairs and trios, and were also attaining skills in reading and sorting information as they interacted with different types of texts, gathered relevant information, and took notes. It is perhaps also worth noting that many of the children also informally mentioned that they particularly enjoyed the interaction with the analysis software, had asked if it was available online and even inquired about a continuation of the project beyond the small pilot.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As noted, it is true to say that two key issues in Scottish education today are the attainment gap, and the dip in Listening & Talking and Reading skills over the transition phase of P7 – S2, as noted by the National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education, and the 2014 Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy respectively. Evidence from the initial evaluative pilot would suggest that the Shakespeare 400 project helps meet several Curriculum for Excellence learning outcomes in Literacy and Technologies and may assist in some way to reversing the drop in literacy skills in later primary school and beyond. Feedback from the initial pilot was very positive, and showed pupils' enhanced engagement in the interdisciplinary nature of the task, as they learned about classic literature using

technology. The pilot also highlighted pupils' wish for the development a further similar activity which could lend itself to encouraging work outside of the classroom as pupils continue their analysis – and engagement with Shakespeare's classics - at home. If reiterated on a larger scale, it could be argued that this in turn, may also help raise the percentage of pupils willing to engage in school-related activities out-with the classroom, and reverse the substantial drop in this number that occurs across the transition phase. Overall, the activity has been proven to engaging and entertaining for pupils, with potential for expansion both in and out of the classroom, and can clearly target and help rectify the aforementioned concerns that are appearing in Scottish education policy at this time.

SOURCES

- E. Sosu, and S. Ellis, Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014)

- Education Scotland, *Curriculum for Excellence: Literacy*, (Scottish Government, 2004)

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- National Statistics, *Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) 2014 (Literacy),* (National Statistics, 2015)