

DEVELOPING AN ESD CURRICULUM IN A JUNIOR SCHOOL

Brixington Junior School, Devon

A whole school approach

This case study tells of the process used by one school to develop a whole school approach to the teaching and learning of sustainable development – including management, curriculum and pupil involvement. It describes how, through a series of steps taken over several years, ESD has become integrated into all curriculum subjects as well as having a separate policy and curriculum in its own right. It also highlights ways the school has found to maintain momentum and focus in the long term.

‘What is sustainable development?’

“I already do that?”

“How can we fit this into an already crowded curriculum?”

“I can’t do that.”

These were just some of the many questions and comments that we were presented with when we first discussed the idea of developing an education for sustainable development (ESD) curriculum. However, after two years of hard work we were receiving feedback like:

“My understanding has developed. I have increased confidence of teaching sustainability throughout the curriculum.”

“We have raised awareness of environmental and social issues.”

This case study explains how an ‘ordinary’ junior school managed to develop and introduce a sustainable curriculum.

Background

Brixington is a large, suburban junior school with over 400 pupils and staff. It is located in Exmouth, a large seaside town and popular tourist location in East Devon.

Our school is fortunate to benefit from extensive grounds. We have two large playgrounds, a large field and an area around the school made up of different habitats including a pond, an orchard and a wooded area. The school already had a feel for environmental issues, although staff felt we taught less about the wider world due to the constraints of the National Curriculum.

The school staff is enthusiastic and hard working, dealing with the demands of the curriculum. As a school we have always developed new initiatives and ideas, which put us in an ideal position to look at new projects. One of these new projects was to try to develop a whole school approach to the teaching and learning of sustainable development. This case study explains how our school went through this process, sharing some of our experiences. We believe our process worked. However, other schools may work in different ways, but we hope that some of ideas will be useful.

Making a start

Our process has followed through a series of logical steps that involved the whole school community in the development of the curriculum.

Coordinating team

Our first step was to set up a team that would have overall responsibility for ESD. Initially this comprised of two members of the teaching staff, who are now the subject leaders for ESD. However the team was widened to include a teacher from each year group and four teaching assistants. The subject leaders reported back to the School Management Team, the head, the Parent Teacher Group and the Governing Body.

Staff development

Developing a sustainable curriculum does require a significant amount of time. We found staff knowledge in this area to be very limited, so our first step was to arrange an INSET day devoted to ESD, led by our County ESD Adviser and the two subject leaders. Devon is fortunate to have this expertise within the County Advisory Service, but there are many other organisations, eg Global Action Plan, that could have offered support in such a training day. The organisers were given time to plan the day in advance; a very important element in making sure the day proved a worthwhile event

The training day was very successful, giving an immediate importance to our work and showing that ESD was becoming a school priority. It was followed up with regular staff meetings, initially aimed at increasing staff knowledge. We held an ESD staff meeting once a term for two years, and plan to revisit ESD at least once a year in the future. Themes included, 'Taking action', 'Transport', 'Decision-making skills' as well as time to review our position as a school. All sessions were open to all staff in the school.

The organisation of these sessions varied. School staff led some, whilst experts in a particular field led others.

Pupil involvement

An important part of our project has been the involvement of the pupils. Before we embarked on this project, we did not involve children in the running of the school, especially in decision-making. This was noted in our last Ofsted inspection report.

"The pupils' personal development is satisfactory, although it is not sufficiently progressive as pupils move through the school. Whilst younger pupils have some responsibilities within their own classroom, this is limited and it is not until Year 5 that pupils are given additional responsibility and the opportunity to show initiative." Ofsted report for Brixington Junior School, 6 – 9 December 1999.

Part of our action plan included the formation of the School Council, which meets every fortnight. Elections are held annually and two children from every class serve on the Council, along with four teachers and a teaching assistant. The Council reports back to every class, so all children are represented. A variety of sub-committees have also been set up, including grounds,

finance and, more recently, a transport group which has led the development of a School Travel Plan.

The Council has fast become an influential body, taken seriously by the School Management Team. They have created their own policy that has been approved by the governors. They hold their own budget, manage a number of projects, have developed an Eco-Code and have the overview of our Eco-School work.

We launched our ESD work with the children through a special ESD Art Day. Every year group worked with an artist to produce a piece of collaborative permanent artwork, with a social or environmental theme. This was followed up later in the year with an Arts week, which focused on art, music, drama and English.

Another pupil-led project has been the creation of a sustainable curriculum trail within the grounds. This project saw children plan, design and purchase materials needed to create this trail.

Making curriculum links

Once staff were beginning to build their ESD knowledge and understanding, we started our first piece of curriculum work. All subject leaders were invited to:

- link existing Schemes of Work to an ESD skill, resulting in a suggested ESD activity for every subject in every year group; and to
- write a policy statement about how ESD can contribute to their subject and vice versa

The way this can be achieved will vary from school to school. We were fortunate to be able to release each subject leader from timetable for an afternoon, giving them the extra time they needed. And because they felt valued, they made the extra effort! We arranged for staff to meet together in small cluster groups, which enabled them to bounce ideas off one another. Other options could be to allocate part of a non-pupil day or staff meeting time.

The end result of this process was a document containing our own ESD lessons that were relevant to our school. From start to finish, the document took a year to produce, which meant that we had time to think and plan ideas. The lessons were all things that we were already doing, but with a sustainable feel to them, making them accessible and non-threatening to all staff. More importantly it was not adding extra work to a crowded curriculum.

The second strand of our work was to produce a separate Scheme of Work for ESD for each year group. The two subject leaders created this, using the QCA formats. These were downloaded from the Internet as blank templates and can be easily adapted for any school. (www.qca.org.uk/)
The themes are:

Our Community – focusing on the child's role within their family, school and local community, and comparing their lives with a child in a contrasting locality.

The Environment – this unit encourages the children to think about local, national and international environments. They are taught to value and appreciate their surroundings, and to consider how they will sustain their environment.

Re-use, Reduce and Re-cycle – this unit examines the resources that children use daily and compares their use with national and international trends. The children are encouraged to challenge their use of resources, thinking about needs against wants.

The Global Community – in their final year in primary school, the children think about their place as a global citizen and about how their actions can affect others. Issues such as fair trade are discussed.

Each Scheme was written in draft and then discussed with year teams before being finalised. Over time we have collected a lot of free resources from various organisations which we collated to support the Schemes of Work, buying additional resources to fill any gaps. We also wrote an ESD Policy, which contained the statements subject leaders had written in the previous year.

Once the plans were in place, we had a meeting to introduce the work to staff, giving us time to explain the plans, show the resources and answer any questions. This was an important part of the process if staff were not to feel worried or unsure about the work. Finally, the Policy and Schemes of Work were presented to the Governing Body before being adopted as part of our formal curriculum.

Every class will have at least six hours a year devoted to ESD in addition to aspects that are integrated into other subject areas. Because ESD has the same status as any other part of our curriculum, it has the same ‘rights’. The subject leaders will monitor the teaching and learning, and a portfolio of good work will be produced. We will also have to report to the Governing Body about how the subject is progressing.

Action a term

We felt it was important to keep up the momentum and focus, so we currently have a school action a term. As a school, we agree a goal for the term (eg reducing paper use or developing a school transport plan) and try to achieve it. The children have been heavily involved in the development of these schemes, and we have a display showing the reasons for our action and the results. It is important that children know how the small actions they take in school will affect the wider world. Not all of the ideas we had worked. For example, we were offered funding to develop a ‘virtual bus’, but our school community did not respond to the idea, so the scheme never took off. We have found it is important to have these failures as they make our successes even more special.

The wider community

When we started on our project, we thought it was important to try to include our local community. We have gained support from local schools and universities, but have found it much harder to work with local businesses and other parts of the community: often the support they could offer did not have a relevant link to our curriculum.

Evaluation

An important part of the process we have undertaken is self-evaluation and improvement. Throughout the project development, we thought it was important to seek the views of the school community. Staff were invited to make suggestions as we progressed, and questionnaires were

sent out twice yearly asking people to comment on the work we were introducing, asking for suggestions, etc.

More importantly, we talked to the children. We have set up an evaluation group containing 20 randomly picked children from across the school, whom we meet with every six months. They are asked a number of questions about their lifestyle both in and out of school, which gives us an insight into how we are influencing them. We hope to see a rise in a more 'sustainable' ethos but have found this to be a slow process. It is often very hard to draw the 'best' answer out of a child!

Benefits of the project

At the end of the project, we feel that our work has had a major impact on the school. Children have more opportunities to have their say across the school; they are now a voice to be listened to. As a school we are better citizens, caring for each other, our school and our community. As a result of our work, we have started a vast range of other projects; many initiated by the children. Our curriculum is in place and we hope it will benefit many children for years to come.

The way forward

The process of developing a sustainable curriculum has proved to be a hard but highly enjoyable task, and the end results have been very pleasing. However, we only see this as the beginning of a longer-term project. The work is in place, but it needs to be sustained. We need to keep a focus on ESD, ensuring that the school community – now and in the future – is still working towards our agreed aims. To achieve this we envisage keeping an action plan active for the subject and holding yearly reviews. The Schemes of Work will be updated regularly. Other ideas for the future will include more dissemination of our work with our local authority as well as other schools.

Key success factors:

- Appoint a coordinating team.
- Seek School Management Team support.
- Add ESD to the School Development Plan.
- Involve the whole school community throughout.
- Give staff time and opportunities to develop skills and knowledge.
- Hold regular INSET (eg one staff meeting a term).
- Share work with others and look at what others are doing.
- Evaluate your work and improve accordingly
- Reflect and be PROUD!

This case study was written by Paul Walker and Anne Voysey, Brixington Junior School, Exmouth, Devon. Brixington Junior School closed July 2004. A new primary school was scheduled to open on the existing site in September 2004. It participated in Making it Happen from 1998 – 2000.