

## TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OURSELVES

*College House Junior School, Nottingham*

Democracy and education for sustainable development in practice

Schools are not just learning factories. They are places where the social, moral, spiritual and physical needs of children are addressed. The recent recommendation that citizenship education should form part of a child's curriculum reflects this point. Education for sustainable development (ESD) can provide a coherent framework to bring this about.

What is education for sustainable development?

Education for sustainable development is about helping children improve their own social and physical environments to enhance their quality of life, whilst allowing other people in different parts of the world and those in future generations the opportunity to do the same. Any society that fails to do this will not sustain itself and is very likely to cause other cultures to go out of existence as well.

To implement ESD, attention must be given to the following key issues:

- the creation of clear goals that can be shared by the school community and communicated clearly to everyone concerned;
- the provision of time to achieve these goals;
- action so that momentum is generated and maintained.

We hope this case study will offer any school or teacher who is interested in these issues a possible framework to get things started.

How we started our journey

In 1994, the children at College House Junior School expressed their exasperation at the amount of time those pupils who behaved in an unacceptable manner received, relative to the rest of the children. The staff felt this was a great opportunity to introduce the principles of democratic behaviour into the lives of children. Democracy in schools is about children and staff taking responsibility for their own social and physical environments.

The first step was to create a Behaviour Working Party of teachers, pupils, parents, governors and midday supervisors to look at the following issues:

- rewarding and celebrating acceptable behaviour;
- deciding on what acceptable behaviour is;
- communicating what acceptable behaviour is to children, parents, teachers and midday supervisors to ensure consistency.

As you can see, the Working Party went for a positive system to run alongside the assertive behaviour management system that was already in place. Having pupils on this governing body sub-committee has been very important, not only because they are the main consumers of our behaviour policy, but also because, without their input, we are always going to be less effective.

Our initial thoughts were considered over-ambitious by some, but unless you aim for the sky you will never get anywhere. It must also be stressed that most of the things that we aimed for did occur, but in a different form from our original plan. We also picked up some interesting new ideas along the way.

A home-school diary

Key issues for the school community related to defining what was meant by 'acceptable behaviour' and finding ways to empower all concerned to achieve these shared objectives. The tool we picked to solve this problem was a 'home-school diary'. This document contained the school's mission statement, a code of positive behaviour and a list of sanctions for unacceptable behaviour, that were negotiated by all concerned. We also stated how we would work in partnership with the children and parents. We wanted everyone to be aware of what we stand for and thereby give the children a fighting chance of meeting our goals. The diary also provides staff and parents with a method of communication that is non-threatening. Forthcoming events, tasks to be completed at home, and messages between parents and teachers are all written in the diary. Parents are asked to sign the diary at the end of each week, and adults initial each message received. Regular discussions about behaviour are conducted via the diary, which has become a very valued tool.

#### **Rewarding children**

To reward children when they meet acceptable standards of behaviour, we awarded them a point. There is a point on offer for each hour they are at school. This includes lunch times, during which the point on offer is managed in close cooperation with the midday supervisors.

These daily totals are recorded in their own diary each day so children, parents and staff have an up-to-date record of behaviour. As we are all seeking to apply the ideas spelt out in the diary, we have found a great deal of support for the system. People see it as being fair.

#### **Partnership with pupils: a school charter**

Whilst at this school you will:

- be offered a wide range of activities both in and out of school;
- work with a wide variety of adults and children;
- be valued as an individual;
- be encouraged to fully develop your confidence;
- with your cooperation, be helped to develop your full potential.

Whilst at this school, you are expected to:

- work with a variety of groups;
- show care and consideration for others;
- take an active and positive part in the school community;
- follow the pupils' code of behaviour;
- respect the school environment and all people in it;
- work hard to fulfil your potential.

At the end of the week the points are added up, and those that have more than 80 per cent of the possible maximum score get a star. The children take a great deal of pride in earning these stars.

Five stars earn them a special certificate. Six certificates earn the right to go on a special trip that they pick. We have been bowling, indoor climbing and ice skating.

#### **Has it been successful?**

The first year we ran the diary we felt that it improved behaviour and were very pleased to find that 75 per cent of children had earned the right to go on a special trip. Over time we have steadily increased the points threshold. You now need 90 percent of the weekly maximum to get a star. The children have responded well to this and last year saw over 90 per cent of children earning the right to go on a special trip!

We have made considerable progress over the last five years. Sometimes we have raced along; at other times we have crawled, and occasionally we have stood still to take stock. We also recognise that some children will not be reached by our system for some of their time with us, but it does provide a positive way back for these children and a framework that we can adapt to meet their individual needs.

#### Useful tools

If children are to be expected to take increasing responsibility for their social and physical environments, they must have forums where they can express themselves and where they can see their views being valued enough for action to be taken quickly.

We have created a number of tools to allow this to happen:

- class contracts negotiated twice a year;
- Class Councils where children chair meetings and discuss whatever they choose;
- provision of 30 minutes each week in the school timetable so Class Councils can occur;
- School Councils made up of two elected representatives from each class, which is chaired by the Head Teacher to allow quick action to be taken on many issues.

These tools have provided a useful framework for allowing children to express themselves and for teachers to explain why things happen as they do. A key point is the need for action when the opportunity arises. Children and staff need to feel that these structures are of value and this can only occur if things happen. When the required action is not possible or appropriate, explanations must be offered. Class and School Councils must not become pointless talking shops – at any cost.

At the start of each year we still get new children asking for swimming pools and the abolition of most school rules! We are however able to talk them round, and after a few short weeks they are raising more appropriate issues and starting to suggest good quality solutions.

Where the children took us next!

Having gained a greater sense of control over their social environment, the children were asked to consider what they could do to improve their physical environment. We feel it is very important for children to start thinking and acting as citizens as soon as possible. The two issues they focused on were the school grounds and litter in the local area.

To tackle these issues it was felt that closer links with other members of the community were needed. Links were formed with local companies and the local Groundwork Trust to develop the school grounds. The School Council was the vehicle chosen to represent the whole school during discussions about what was needed in the grounds. Over the years, the School Council has been regularly consulted to assist those that the school has asked to improve the grounds. The perspective of children is different from our own, and the process of consultation has enhanced our understanding of children's needs and opinions.

To tackle issues outside of the school a link was formed with our local Borough Council through their Local Agenda 21 officer. Many councils have a Local Agenda 21 officer whose job is to promote sustainable development in their area. Our officer was keen to be involved with the school because she recognised that schools are often at the centre of the local community and that no community can be sustainable if it neglects to educate their children about sustainability.

This link has involved a time commitment both by the school and the Borough Council. We feel this time commitment is well worth making because it can bring considerable benefits to the children's learning.

Through the link our children have adopted the streets around the school and each class collects litter in those streets on a weekly basis. It is not a matter of replacing Local Authority street cleaning; rather we are getting children to take some responsibility for their streets, and hopefully encouraging them to create less litter in the first place. We collected data on the type and location of the litter and the School Council presented this information to a meeting of the local Council's Technical Services Committee. As a result, the Committee moved specific litter bins identified by the children as being in the wrong place, and negotiated a change to the commercial contract of a street cleaning company. The children learned about the process of change and the role they can play in it as active citizens.

As the children have become more interested in their physical environment, we have provided them with the opportunity to participate on the School's Premises Committee during inspections of the school. The children drew our attention to many issues that we had quite literally overlooked. Class Councils also help us identify things that the children think we miss – which we often do!

Formalising our environmental work

Our local Council link made us realise that we needed formally to build up the knowledge our children have about environmental issues and the skills they need to tackle them. Children cannot have worthwhile opinions on matters they do not understand. The tool we created to meet this need was an Environment Policy.

Our Environment Policy has four functions:

1. To spell out clearly the philosophical reasons behind what we are doing.
2. To identify the key skills and concepts needed under the headings of 'empowerment', 'reflection', 'knowledge' and 'interdependence'.

3. To provide a time-tabled framework in which specific topics will be covered so that momentum can be maintained and the links with the rest of the work children are doing can be more easily formed.
4. To raise awareness of these issues with new parents and new staff.

We are constantly evolving our methods of implementation. At present we are seeking to put democratic and environmental education into our delivery of each National Curriculum subject. Every piece of termly planning now contains an ESD objective which we seek to implement through our everyday teaching. We seek to put democratic and environmental education at the heart of our school.

Having created this policy, we also provided two off-timetable days per term to address each topic we had identified. We attach great importance to children building up the knowledge and skills that are vital to being an informed and active citizen.

#### Summary

We hope that this case study offers a possible framework which you can use with your school community to address issues of pupils' responsibilities – as well as their rights. We seek to encourage the whole school community – especially its children – to be reflective, considerate and empowered citizens who will seek to apply and spread their knowledge to the benefit of themselves, the global community and future generations.

*This case study was written by Paul Bridgmont, College House Junior School. College House is located in suburban Chilwell and serves approximately 300 7 – 11 year olds. It participated in CMAS from 1996 – 1998.*