

We believe that enjoyable outdoor learning experiences foster and strengthen the natural curiosity of the children and improve how they learn. This story shares some of our creative outdoor learning experiences as we bring the Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) area of the curriculum to life for our children.

Roots, shoots and wellington boots

Our story in bringing SESE to life

Introduction

Ballyraine N.S. is situated on the outskirts of Letterkenny. It is a co-educational school with a current enrolment of 232 pupils and twelve teachers.

The immediate outdoor environment of our school has become a rich additional learning resource for the children. We believe that enjoyable outdoor learning experiences foster and strengthen the natural curiosity of the children and improve how they learn. This story shares some of our creative outdoor learning experiences as we bring the Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) area of the curriculum to life for our children.

Painting the canvas

In 2000, we set about reviewing the potential offered by the school grounds in the development of 'an outdoor classroom' to promote learning in SESE. We knew that the children's achievement across the other subjects would also benefit. The team work inherent in the outdoor classroom would provide lots of opportunity to practice skills, develop deeper understanding of concepts and strengthen attitudes already being fostered in the classroom. The wildlife habitats would create a focus for the children and instil a sense of pride in their school and locality. We recognised that one of the greatest challenges facing teachers in today's technological age is to help children to 'awaken their senses' and to appreciate the beauty and the excitement of discovering the world around them.

So where would we begin? Although located on a busy road, the school was encircled by native trees, hedgerows and large tracts of vegetation and grass. An environmental

audit revealed the untapped potential offered by our school grounds. Realising the richness of the canvas available to us was a first step. In the early days, we took part in environmental competitions and challenges. Success in these types of events provided us with greater confidence, motivation and some much needed funding to continue our work.

The Green School's Programme also acted as a catalyst for further work. We established Green school committees with representatives from the different classes. It wasn't long before we were awarded our first Green Flag in 2003. It's amazing how the canvas was taking shape and a whole new learning landscape had begun to emerge. Let's have a closer look at some outdoor projects we have undertaken to create this new landscape.

Pure magic!

The wildlife habitats in this new landscape included a butterfly patch, vegetable garden, school pond and a woodland path. The butterfly patch was an instant success and it wasn't long before caterpillars were munching on nasturtium leaves and butterflies emerged from their winter hibernation. A suitably weather-resistant wall chart was placed nearby to help the children identify and record the different species of butterfly observed. Last year, children from the junior classes took the butterfly patch a step further. They collected some caterpillars and carefully placed them in their own 'butterfly cage' made from a large glass container. Over time the children had the chance to marvel at the sight of the caterpillars constructing a cocoon. In spring, four cabbage white butterflies emerged. Having carefully removed the cover from the cage, the children then watched the butterflies make their bid for freedom and fly towards the light and heat. A textbook approach to the life cycle of the butterfly could never come close to this learning experience. For the teacher, it was pure magic to witness the wide eyed look on the children's faces.

In a similar fashion the school pond also provided the children with an opportunity to observe and record the progress of frog spawn as it developed into frogs. In the lead up to the summer holidays the pond becomes a home to hoverflies, whirlygig beetles and dragonflies. These projects provided the stimulus for a great variety of classroom-based learning, both oral and written.

Bird-feeding stations are located around the school grounds. This year 5th class children created a bird observation or 'look out' post in their classroom. A section of the classroom window was 'blacked out' and the children used binoculars to observe and record feathered visitors during the winter months. Graphing in mathematics, painting in Visual arts and listening and responding in music were never as captivating.

The creation and maintenance of habitats actively involves children from all classes at different times during the year. They are given ownership of the habitat and, with the support of the teacher, are encouraged to make decisions about caring for it and developing it further. Recording the story of the development of each new habitat as it unfolds in word, picture, text and photo is actively encouraged.

Parents too have a significant role. During the summer months, together with the children, they are invited to volunteer to form a watering and weeding rota. This must be one of the few downsides of not confining SESE to a textbook!

Hatching a good idea

The incubation project is one of the most exciting pieces of work we have undertaken. Watching and waiting, full of hopeful expectation...the children are eventually rewarded with the welcome chirping and cheeping sounds as the bundles of yellow fluff become accustomed to their school corridor home...albeit in a glass incubation box.

This incubation project was to help 'hatch' our school farm idea. The inspiration for our school farm arose from a study trip made by the principal to Stavanger in Norway in 1995. The sight of children busily painting a hen-house bright red outside an island school deep in the fjords was to later inspire the creation of our school farm in 2008. The principles of the curriculum, with the children at the centre of learning, combined with an enterprising and enthusiastic 5th class teacher provided us with the motivation to set about our school farm enterprise.

With the assistance of 6th class, together with parental support, our 'state of the art' hen-house took shape. Four farm managers were selected from the different classes and, in September 2008, our new hens moved in. Our farm was a 'mini' business enterprise with the farm managers taking responsibility for feeding the hens, purchasing the food and

marketing and selling the eggs. The cleaning out of the hen house was the least exciting of the jobs undertaken but team work and a little encouragement did the trick. The children prepared regular reports on the farm work for the different classes. The responsibility and success of the farm clearly increased the confidence and self-esteem of the children. By the end of the year 2008-09 a profit of €220 was made in the sale of the eggs, and 'Woodland Way' hens have been the focus of local and national press.

Trade secrets

What are some of the key actions we take as a school in making the outdoor classroom into a reality?

- Providing regular time as a whole school staff to become more aware of the curriculum and explore how best it can help us serve the learning needs of the children.
- Planning and communication are important if the whole school community is to get on board. We began with an environmental audit of our school grounds. Then we agreed a whole school plan for SESE that ensures continuity and progression of content and skills. The plan is habitat and themes led rather than textbook led.
- Starting small. We identify and develop the learning potential of one habitat at a time.
- Providing regular opportunities during the year for teachers to review the unfolding progress and challenges.
- Thinking 'outside the box' when devising a learning experience as this will inspire the most reluctant child
- Establishing a green team made up of teachers and children as part of the Green Flag Programme as this provides an excellent focus for the projects.
- Encouraging the children to record their work as it progresses. A variety of ways to record the story make it more interesting and stimulating.

- Giving children ownership of the projects by encouraging them to make decisions about the jobs to be done and agreeing rotas to do them.
- Calling in the experts from time to time. These are especially useful when starting off with a new project. Enfo, Crann, INTO Heritage in Schools Scheme and An Taisce have proven a wonderful support for us. A parent with an interest or expertise is always a great support.
- And ... accepting that the children will get their hands dirty!

But remember...

Sometimes it's just as important to 'smell the roses' before starting out on another piece of work. Let the children enjoy and, with teacher guidance, exploit the full learning potential of the outdoor classroom already created. Then, at a later stage, the next creative project in support of SESE can begin.

A special thanks to David Oliver, the principal of Ballyraine N.S., Letterkenny and all of the teachers for sharing their story with us.
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