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Improving teaching and learning using the outdoor environment: Lavington Park Federation

URN: 125980 - Duncton Junior School, 125831 - Graffham Infant School

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Brief description

An example of a journey of discovery at two small federated schools in West Sussex as they utilise the rich resource of the outdoor environment to improve provision and engagement with pupils and learning. It illustrates the journey towards excellence and focuses on strategies to use the local environment to improve not only geography but also other subjects as part of an integrated approach to the curriculum.

Overview – the school's message

'Starting my first headship in a pair of very small rural schools in 2007, I needed to set my own vision across the Federation to improve teaching and learning. As a geographer, I realised the potential of this area within sight of the South Downs as a teaching resource, not just for geography but also across the curriculum. This led to the beginnings of a new, creative topic structure with a strong focus on out of classroom learning. The addition of the Forest School, using a stretch of woodland one mile away, enriched this culture. Every child has a forest school experience each year; this improves their confidence, self-esteem, collaborative and enquiry skills.

Our next steps are to develop our planning across all areas of the curriculum in the same way through expanding this enquiry led, creative outdoor approach to all learning. We have already seen a dramatic improvement in standards of literacy through children's writing based on their outdoor



learning experiences.'

Helen Martin, headteacher

The good practice in detail

Background

In 2007, the new headteacher identified that, to bring both schools to outstanding, there was a need to focus on improving teaching and learning and re-structuring the curriculum. Both schools needed to be re-energised in order for the newly formed Federation to function effectively. The curriculum at this point was stale and focused on outdated QCDA units of work which did not allow pupils to broaden their thinking. Teachers needed to 'think outside the box and be creative in their planning'.



In June 2011 [Ofsted](#) identified that there had been 'a marked improvement in the overall quality of teaching and in pupils' progress across a range of subjects'. Lessons showed that pupils had become 'confident writers who know grammatical conventions well' and that they had become 'independent and highly motivated learners'. Activities across the full range of subjects provide a range of experiences which have improved pupils' literacy skills, especially writing.

Improving the curriculum

The old planning structure was disabled and teachers were given the freedom to plan creatively. This placed the teachers into an unfamiliar and challenging setting. The initial focus was on geography since this provided an obvious link to the outdoor environment. The first unit, 'Who do you think you are?', focused on the local area and pupils' individual



diversities and histories. Teachers initially brainstormed their ideas, with everyone expected to contribute, to develop their understanding of the local area. This opened up discussion about the need to make learning opportunities more interactive. Planning in an integrated way, including a focus on geography, challenged teachers' creative thinking. This was the beginning of a 'can do culture' around the school and encouraged the teachers to develop their planning and creative skills. It was a 'eureka moment' and the first step towards a high-quality curriculum. The use of the outdoor environment, with a focus on geography, raised awareness of how outdoor learning could be used to provide a spine for this high-quality curriculum. Over the next two years, teachers planned collaboratively and developed their skills across a range of themes; which also promoted sharing of subject expertise. The result was a new revitalised curriculum including:

- Antarctica
- Dunton

‘We’ve learned how to read maps.’

- [Wicked weather](#)
- [Mountains and flooding](#)

The forest school

With this increasing use of the environment it was a logical step to become part of the [Forest School network](#). Good personal and social skills are developed through a wide range of interesting and practical activities that encourage children to be inquisitive and to find out more. For example, children are able to help build a fire, search for pirate treasure and to sit safely within a shelter when it is raining. These types of experiences are then built upon in the classroom to expand children's knowledge of literacy and numeracy. The Forest School helps pupils take calculated risks in the outside environment and also provides an important starting point for imaginative, written and creative experiences.



Parents and carers remark on the opportunities available to their children, how well their interests have been developed and how effectively they are used in the Forest School curriculum. As one of them observed, 'Both of my children enjoy school and are given opportunities to experience a wide variety of things they would not be able to without Forest School and the activities provided through the able pupils scheme.' There is a strong focus on freedom to learn and to develop a sense of belonging and empathy with their local environment. The children's geography skills have improved and they are much more aware of the rich diversity in their local area.

Some examples of pupils' work in the Forest School:

- [a guide to Forest Schools](#)
- [a map](#) produced by a pupil in Reception.

All pupils from both schools get the opportunity to experience the outdoor through the Forest Schools programme. Each class gets a [six-week block](#) each year, while children in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Reception classes use the resource all year round. The

‘I feel safe in the countryside.’

focus is on developing a range of skills and empathy and awareness of the environment. Evident benefits are that pupils became confident learners and enjoy being at school; positive relationships are fostered and the outside environment acts as a 'leveller' which improves the self-esteem of all pupils.

Pupils also develop a greater sense of place. They learn about sustainability and the need to look after their environment. They understand that decisions they make now will affect their future and they take their [knowledge](#) of the environment and apply it in lessons. Pupils have a keen interest in what is going on around them and are able to share their own



knowledge and 'teach the teacher'. For example, when one of the younger pupils was able to explain to her teacher which fungi were mushrooms and edible and which were toadstools and poisonous. One teacher said: 'It has flipped everything I learnt at university on its head – rather than bring the curriculum to the children I now spark off their ideas and this impacts on my future planning'. It also provides good opportunities for pupils to voice their opinions.

‘I can escape in my own thoughts.’

The Ofsted report 'Education for sustainable development – Improving schools- improving lives', published in December 2009, identified that 'the most successful work on sustainability linked learning to action, so that pupils knew how they could make a difference...this provided pupils with a platform for presenting their ideas on how to improve their local environment and gave them the opportunity to tackle real issues'. This approach is epitomised in a letter sent to the Prime Minister by a Year 6 pupil at the school.

William, a year 3 pupil, who was working on P levels, found the forest the most enlightening of places to learn. No longer did he have to be provided with differentiated work that may be significantly different from other children; he was the leader in developing a whole class enquiry about finding the best place to build a bridge across the stream. His language development was startling and transferred back into the classroom, as was his confidence in his own ability. He then had such strong memories of that positive learning experience that he would talk animatedly every time a new class headed to the forest and his bridge.

‘Being outside teaches you things you don't get taught anywhere else.’

The school's background

The [Lavington Park Federation](#) includes Duncton Junior School and Graffham Infant School.

Duncton Junior School is a small village school. There are three classes, one with mixed-year groups, with some year groups having very few children. Most pupils are of White British heritage, and many choose to come to the school from some distance away. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is below the national average. A significant, and increasing, proportion of children have special educational needs and/or disabilities. These needs include behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.



Graffham is a small infants school. Children start in the Reception class and continue into the mixed-age class for Years 1 and 2. They then move on to the junior school some four miles away. Almost all pupils are from a White British heritage. The proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is low and there are

no pupils with statements of special educational needs. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is also low. The school has been gained a Healthy School award, an international award and is nationally recognised for its work as a 'Forest School'.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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