

BEING BOLD

HELEN MARTIN

In this article, Helen describes how pupils in her federation of schools shaped their own curriculum to create an inspirational plastic-free performance.

Pupil choice

Imagine walking into an Early Years classroom and observing the range of experiences provided there: the delight in the pupils' concoctions in the mud kitchen; a play based around one pupil's weekend experiences; and pupils creating a ship with a pointed end so it can get through the waves more quickly. Our pupils flourish under these open-ended, pupil-centred opportunities both inside and outside at Graffham Infant School and enjoy their rich diversity of play. The pupils commit themselves to projects on every level, gathering their friends around to inspire each other.

Two years ago, we decided to continue this curriculum offer across the whole of our federation of two village schools and into Duncton Junior School too. Our aim was: 'to remember what can allow pupils to be curious and to master the subject they are working on, making links that are useful and appropriate to them, and to produce high-quality outcomes that they enjoy sharing with peers and adults alike'.

Our skilled teachers, under the guidance of the Deputy, Lucy Whiffin, have experimented with bringing pupil choice yet further into this learning about the theme of 'Plastic-free'. During this topic the pupils are free to choose the way they want to show their learning. For example, the best way to persuade local supermarkets to consider use of single use plastic, or which DT project to complete out of re-used materials, creating stunning art work from newspapers, and creating a World Tabla Music composition about a place that is clean and plastic-free.

Amanda Spielman, HMI, welcomes schools that: 'have a vibrant enthusiasm for revitalising the debate about the curriculum. However, at the very heart of education sits the vast accumulated wealth of human knowledge and what we choose to impart to the next generation: the curriculum' (see web panel).

And we do debate: we do not stand still on changes to our curriculum. We mull over our curriculum until it is right for each year group and ensure that it is not the same as was previously taught.

The coverage may remain the same – our statutory duty – but it is the way it is delivered, where it is taught and by whom that expands our offer. As Peter Humphries (Ofsted's senior HMI for schools in the West Midlands region) noted: 'Please be assured that if you are bold and courageous to adapt your curriculum and do exciting things you will get credit for it... Ofsted's new inspection framework in 2019 will bring with it a clear focus on the curriculum and will reward schools for being "bold and courageous"' (see web panel).

We have taken up the challenge to be 'bold' and handed the curriculum over to the pupils. Rigorous planning underpins this strategy, together with our data tracking, which identifies those pupils who may need extra inspiration in their learning to improve their overall outcomes.

Our Plastic-free initiative and summer performance

The 'Plastic-free' theme has truly enlivened the pupils' geographical spirits and turned them into environmental campaigners. Officially, we may lead the subject, but the pupils are inspired to find their voices through geography and plastic had been on all our minds for some time.

Geography has a large part to play in each performance: links with India inspired our first performance four years ago. On a teacher-visit to Southern India, we Skyped demonstrations of the dances that teachers from our link school near Bangalore had taught us. This inspired us to continue with a performance each summer.

Here, the Geographical Association Strategic Plan reminds us to 'appreciate the rich opportunities for learning offered by geography and its role in promoting personal and intellectual development for young people' (see web panel).

The summer performance takes place on the school field, overlooking the South Downs, so this incredible backdrop forms part of the experience – we appreciate the place that makes the schools so unique. This year the performance included a new and exciting challenge: one of our parents (who is a film-maker and editor) supported and led the pupils in making short films on their views and concerns about plastic in the environment. We allowed the pupils to encapsulate their environmental concerns into everything they did, empowering them to take ownership of what is a global issue, but on the small scale of the federation of schools.

Getting the community involved

The 'Plastic-free' themed performance wove dance, music, art, debate and poetry around the skilfully created films (Figure 1). Each film and dance connected with the hard-hitting theme. For example, year 6 pupils had recently visited the Houses of Parliament, then came back to script and spend a day filming their own version of a parliamentary debate on single-use plastic. They used Parliament's systems for voting – and copied the arguing and shouting across the 'House'.



Figure 1: The Plastic-free themed performance wove dance, music, art, debate and poetry around the skilfully created films. Photo © Helen Martin.

Beautiful artwork was incorporated into the performance, including a stunning year 3/4 plastic seahorse (Figure 2), Georgia O'Keeffe flowers (Figure 3) from year 6 and jellyfish umbrellas from the infants. One display in school shows the differences in lifestyles between those that care for the environment and those that do not. This theme was highlighted in their film where pupils wore masks to show the processing of waste.

The PTA developed the theme by providing food and drinks throughout the performances, using only recyclable or reusable cups and plates: parents were asked to bring their own picnic plates to use throughout the evening. The festival atmosphere continued into the evening, long after the films and dances were over.

The film scripts came from the pupils' geographical knowledge and motivation around the subject of 'plastic-free'. As a federation, middle leadership is a challenge, so we share subject leadership. In geography, the theme was shared across everyone in the school. While the subject leader monitored and developed the subject, the actions and improvements came from within the school itself – through debate and discussion, as mentioned above.

Starting local and using the global to inspire us

The BBC's exhilarating and thought-provoking documentary series Blue Planet II (see web panel) had a more profound effect on our pupils than anyone might have imagined. Using geographical questioning supported pupils in their concerns and helped their understanding that, even at a young age, their small actions can make a big difference to the environment longer term.

In our schools, experiential learning is led by the pupils' curiosity. The pupils spend time at Forest School learning to love their environment. They make incredible feasts in their junior maths mud kitchen, learn to negotiate about the best use of the sticks, nettles and recyclables, develop their own spirituality with mindfulness in their collective worship, and write poetry sitting beside the beautiful River Rother. Through these experiences, pupils come to care more about the environment and inspire others to change. As Sir David Attenborough says: 'No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced'.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Craig Slattery, our amazing film-maker, and to all of the inspirational pupils, teachers and parents at Graffham and Duncton Schools.



Figure 2: The Y3/4 plastic waste seahorse is a stunning example of the incredible artwork inspired by the project. Photo © Helen Martin.



Figure 3: Year 6 artwork was inspired by the work of Georgia O'Keeffe. Photo © Helen Martin.

WEB RESOURCES

Sir David Attenborough on the BBC: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04tjbtv>
 Geographical Association: <https://www.geography.org.uk/About-the-GA>
 HMCI: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hmcis-commentary-october-2017>
 Ofsted: <http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/be-bold-and-courageous-with-your-curriculum-ofsted-urges/>

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