

Inspiring at Spire

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Inspired by the 'Guerrilla Curriculum', Dave explains how at Spire Junior School in Chesterfield they changed their curriculum for one with more in-depth learning, subject-specific skills development and authentic outcomes.

Making the move

Spire Junior School serves an area of high social deprivation and many of our pupils struggle in their motivation for learning. We wanted to change our curriculum to meet the needs of our pupils and to inspire their learning. As a staff we discussed our current curriculum and what we would like to change moving forward. Common frustrations, such as 'there is too much to cover' and 'there is not enough time', were identified. We also asked the pupils who said 'we are just getting into a topic when it finishes at half-term so a new topic can begin'. As Head teacher, during my research into different models I came across *The Guerrilla Curriculum* by Jonathan Lear (2015) and used some of the ideas within this to develop our curriculum.

Less is more

We took the bold move of only having three topics per year in each year group. The Autumn term would be our 'Discover theme' (history topic), the Spring term our 'Explore theme' (geography topic) and our Summer term our 'Create theme' (arts-based topic). This would give us 13 weeks on each theme and allow us to look in greater depth at the curriculum.

Subject-specific skills

As well as teaching the curriculum we wanted to teach subject-specific skills to our pupils and build up on these, year-on-year. For geography, we looked at the skills required and divided them into four categories with some of the key words linked to skills in brackets:

1. Beginning (Name, Label, Draw, Identify)
2. Developing (Compare, Describe, Draw)
3. Securing (Analyse, Compare, Observe, Combine)
4. Enriched (Compare, Reflect, Combine, Appreciate).

Staff would plan activities for the pupils, matched to both National Curriculum objectives and subject-specific skills. As a staff we also discussed and agreed on the following key concepts we wanted pupils to learn within the geography theme:

- Recognise that pupils can impact their environment and community
- Show a commitment to justice
- Recognise their roles as Global Citizens
- Communicate learning in relevant ways
- Show empathy.

Authentic outcomes

We were sure the pupils would enjoy our new curriculum model, but as ever there are no guarantees. We thought about how often, when we then set tasks, they would respond with 'why?', with the mentality 'What's in it for me?'. Following staff discussions and inspiration from Jonathan Lear's (2019) *The Monkey-Proof Box*, we devised a curriculum with authentic outcomes.

Y3: Where in the world would you like to go?

Our learning journey began with the question 'Where in the world would you like to go?'. During the next few weeks, we read *Around the World in 80 days* by Jules Verne (2018). This took the pupils on a journey starting in London, England, and

travelling around the globe. We ventured to places such as France, India, China, North America and South America. Using *Around the World* we were able to focus on specific countries and the delights each country had to offer.

The pupils looked at maps, globes, and atlases to learn more about the location of these countries and the land use. They learned about 4-point grid references and how to pinpoint specific features, such as towns, cities and landmarks.

Once the pupils were armed with this information, they were able to create their dream island. Working in pairs the pupils began by building a 3D model from cardboard (Figure 1). Each square of the island fits together which shows contours and contrasts of how the land is used. The pupils thoughtfully made small structures using nets of shapes, linked to maths, to create their beach huts, hotels, recycling centre and even a hospital. They used mini marshmallows to fashion drystone walls in the undulating fields to contain the livestock.

Specific symbols of each country were identified, such as the flag, as were traditional food and the main religion of some countries around the world. We also incorporated some science into our project by looking at different rock types. For instance, Lanzarote as an island predominately formed of volcanic rock and the soft chalk of the White Cliffs of Dover.



Figure 1: Y3 created their dream island, which showed their knowledge of land use and physical and human geography developed by the topic. Photo © Dave Shaw.

We held discussions about why some places are safer than others for building houses due to the types and location of the underlying rocks.

Once complete, the pupils constructed their large models in an empty shop in the local shopping centre, also decorating the walls with work from their topic. Feedback sheets for the public were completed after visits. The shop received hundreds of visitors who gave much praise and constructive feedback, which really gave the pupils' confidence a boost.

Overall, the year 3 pupils found this project fascinating. During our recent parents/carers' meetings many of them said how much the pupils have talked about their work and places they would like to visit.

Y4: Natural disasters

In year 4 we decided to focus on natural disasters that happen around the world and why. Over the term we allowed the pupils to decide which areas of this topic they wished to focus on. The four areas covered were tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes and tornadoes. The pupils produced an amazing class assembly for the school and their parents/carers, which enabled the whole school to see their learning across subject areas, such as art, design & technology, writing, drawing, tables, graphs and diary entries.

The authentic outcome of this work led to the pupils becoming published authors. We collated their work and sent it off to be professionally printed (Figure 2). Following this we held a book launch to sell the book and sign copies for parents and the public! The pupils are very proud of the book they were able to produce.



Figure 2: Y4 covered tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes and tornadoes and collated their work in a professionally printed book. Photo © Dave Shaw.

Y5: Is plastic fantastic?

In Year 5 we started our enquiry with a sleepover at The Deep aquarium in Hull. We learnt about the creatures in the ocean, how they survive and how their habitats are rapidly changing due to human waste. The pupils had a private tour of The Deep, carried out workshops related to the sharks in our seas and, most impressively, had a sleepover next to the shark tank! It is safe to say that we all had a wonderful time. On our return to school we spent time in our topic lessons locating the continents and oceans around the world, while researching the question 'Is plastic fantastic?' and looking at the major plastic deposits in our oceans.

In our English lessons, pupils looked at a range of non-fiction texts, learnt about how water is purified, how bottled water is manufactured and investigated the vast quantities of bottles used just for water. Pupils worked hard to write persuasive pieces trying to combat the problem of plastic bottles. During the second half of the term, the pupils read the non-fiction text, *Song of the Dolphin Boy* (Laird, 2018), which addressed the issue of plastic pollution affecting seals off the coast of Scotland. The narrative told the story from the point of view of a young person allowing the pupils in year 5 to empathise with the characters and situation.

The pupils continued by working in groups to research the issue of plastic pollution and discover how different countries are addressing the problem. To raise awareness, the pupils wrote persuasive letters, designed posters and collected hundreds of bottle tops to create a visual presentation of how big the problem is.

As part of our research, we were fortunate to work with the Premier League and hear how they are tackling the problem of plastic pollution at stadiums around the United Kingdom. After carrying out workshops with members of the football team, the pupils designed re-usable water bottles and carrier bags for use at matches. They then arranged for bottles and carrier bags to be manufactured, and these products are now advertised by the Chesterfield FC Mascot, Chester the Fieldmouse (Figure 3).

For the final part of their enquiry, year 5 pupils created a 45-minute presentation to show their work from this term. They worked incredibly hard to produce PowerPoint presentations, videos, persuasive pieces of writing, posters and images... it was fabulous! The Premier League was so impressed with the pupils' promotional video they showed it at half-time in a Chesterfield FC match.



Figure 3: Chester the Fieldmouse advertises the re-usable bottles and bags designed by Y5 pupils. Photo © Dave Shaw.

Inspiring aspirations

The authentic outcomes for each topic also enable the pupils to work with professionals from outside of education to create something tangible. This approach provides a critical audience for pupils' work and raises aspirations for their future careers. Our bold move is proving to be truly inspirational.

References

- Laird, E. (2018) *Song of the Dolphin Boy*. London: Macmillan Children's Books.
- Lear, J. (2015) *Guerrilla Teaching: Revolutionary tactics for teachers on the ground, in real classrooms, working with real children, trying to make a real difference*. Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press.
- Lear, J. (2019) *The Monkey-Proof Box: Curriculum design for building knowledge, developing creative thinking and promoting independence*. Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press.
- Verne, J. (2018) *Around the World in 80 Days*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform.



Web Resources

The Deep aquarium:
<https://www.thedeep.co.uk>

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