

POWER TO THE PUPILS

BRYONY BROMLEY

Here, Bryony outlines the Eco-Schools programme and describes how schools can get involved. She provides examples from her work in Wales.

The Eco-Schools programme

The Eco-Schools programme is now the largest environmental education programme in the world, running in over 60 countries. It is administered by the Foundation for Environmental Education, but each nation involved manages the programme through a non-governmental organisation. In Wales, 'Keep Wales Tidy', a leading environmental charity, manages the programme and has sourced funding from Welsh Government to do so.

After graduating from the University of Aberystwyth with a degree in geography and then completing a PGCE in Primary education, as well as spending a couple of years of supply teaching, I began work as an Eco-Schools officer for Keep Wales Tidy in South Wales. Ten years on, I am still here and I use my geography and teaching background on a daily basis to enhance a really fantastic programme for pupils of any age.

The unique thing about the Eco-Schools programme is that it provides a truly pupil-led approach to making a positive impact on issues linked to the environment and sustainability. The impact can be measured and visualised in order to illustrate the difference small actions pupils can make and their reasoning behind them.

Making changes

Take Llysfaen Primary in Cardiff, for example. A few years ago the pupils on the School's Eco-committee noticed that the caretaker was switching on all of the lights in the morning before the teachers and pupils arrived. As a school of about 450 pupils, this was a lot of lights. The Committee also noticed that many lights were switched on as a matter of habit, rather than when they were needed. The Committee decided on two courses of action. First, they asked the caretaker not to turn all the lights on when he arrived. Second, they devised a simple sticker system to indicate which lights were ok to use and which really did not need to be turned on.



Pupils investigated the impact of palm oil plantations on rainforests. Photo © KYTan/Shutterstock.

The Committee looked at the weekly electricity use in the school before and after implementing the above changes, and found that the school had managed to save 719 units or about £70 in just one week!

What is particularly impressive and inspiring about this project is that it has been incorporated into all year 5's classwork. It is now this year group's responsibility to check that the system is still working, which directly links to curriculum work on energy production, consumption and the impact of climate change. The pupils are able to see how something they initiated has saved the school thousands of pounds and their actions have a direct impact on our planet.

Having worked with hundreds of Eco-Schools across Wales, it is evident that the programme works most effectively when it is embedded into a school's ethos and linked clearly to the curriculum. This answers the 'why?' behind all the actions we are being constantly told we should do: 'Why turn off lights, what difference does that make to our planet?', 'Why reduce, reuse and recycle?', 'Why use rainwater instead of tap water for toilets and plants?' Without understanding the reasoning behind different actions, it is almost impossible to enable a sustained behaviour change in pupils. They need to know the consequences of positive or negative actions.



The Committee noticed that many lights were switched on as a matter of habit. Photo © Tawining/Shutterstock.

Rainforests is a popular topic in many primary schools and provides a wealth of opportunity to learn about these incredible habitats. When pupils learn about rainforests, they come to understand the huge threat that rainforests face, and feel strongly about the injustices being done to animals, people and trees alike.

In Radnor Valley Primary in Powys, pupils took what they had learnt both in class and at a local Eco-Day with other Eco-Schools to make a sustained change for the better. After learning about the devastating impact of palm oil plantations on rainforests, members of the Radnor Primary's Eco-Committee sat down with the school cook to investigate what the kitchen used that contained unsustainable palm oil. As a result, the cook now sources alternative cooking oil, is much more aware of what goes into the food and knows what to avoid buying.



Figure 1: Food is a fantastic geography topic, which can include fair trade and the benefits of home-grown produce. Photo © Bryony Bromley.

Food is another great geography topic: you can look at where food is grown, how it is grown and any impacts on people and the environment, how food is transported and the amounts of food that are wasted. The topic can take any number of directions, but looking at food miles covers aspects of numeracy and prompts discussion about buying locally-grown and seasonal food. Pupils can look at growing their own and compare it to shop-bought food to gain a greater understanding of which foods can be grown at home (Figure 1).

After establishing a number of raised beds and an orchard in the school grounds, pupils from Ysgol Dolaſon were able to discuss the benefits of growing your own food. Many pupils were really taking the sustainability message home with them and have since set up their own vegetable or fruit growing areas at home.

Voices of the future

In a society where through the media we know lots about what happens globally it is easy to become lost in the enormity of problems and to feel that we cannot do anything to change the outcome. Facilitating pupil voice and pupil-led change allows young people to see that they can make a positive difference and that we are not completely powerless. Linking the knowledge gained through geography-based topics to Eco-Schools provides a mechanism for identifying problems, planning solutions, measuring impacts and celebrating successes. Empowering our young people to lead on implementing positive changes is such a powerful gift that we, as educators, can bestow. I continue to be inspired on a daily basis by the creative solutions that pupils implement through the Eco-Schools programme.

WEB RESOURCES

- Eco-Schools (Wales):
www.keepwalestidy.cymru/eco-schools
- Eco-Schools (England):
www.eco-schools.org.uk/
- Eco-Schools (Scotland):
www.keeptoscotlandbeautiful.org/sustainable-development-education/eco-schools/
- Eco-Schools (Northern Ireland):
www.eco-schoolsni.org/cgi-bin/greeting?instanceID=1
- Keep Wales Tidy:
www.keepwalestidy.cymru

Bryony Bromley is an education and senior officer for Keep Wales Tidy, covering the East region of Wales and primarily supporting schools to implement the Eco-Schools programme.