

SUSTAINABLE LIVING AT OUR SPECIAL SCHOOL

LEANNE WHITFIELD AND JEMMA HARRIES

Editor, Richard, says: 'As a Moderator for the Primary Geography Quality Mark I am always inspired to see the work that other schools carry out to develop teaching and learning in Geography. I contacted Ty Gwyn School after reviewing their submission, because they had carried out such a vast array of work to foster sustainability, both of the subject and the experiences that the pupils at the school enjoy'. Here, Leanne and Jemma explain their journey.

We are ESDGC Co-ordinator and Geography Co-ordinator at Ty Gwyn Special School, a local authority day school in Ely, Cardiff. Our purpose-built environment was completed in 2010, and is situated between two other special needs schools. There is a local field and park adjacent to the school. We have two local shops and a library/community centre within walking distance, which is accessed daily by all age groups.

Our pupils range from 3 to 19 years old; many from multi-cultural backgrounds and religions. All our pupils have a statement of special educational needs with varying degrees of complexity, severity and health issues. The pupils are divided into two categories: pupils with a diagnosis of autism and/or severe challenging behavioural needs, and pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties with many non-ambulant pupils.

Due to the nature of our pupils, the whole school works from foundation level with the exception of our gifted and talented pupils, who work at National Curriculum level. The level of needs differ drastically from pupil to pupil: from hearing and sight loss, ambulant and non-ambulant, wheelchair users, to pupils still learning to walk, and from severe health issues to extreme challenging behaviour. Practical and tactile learning is an extremely important learning tool and the key in helping our pupils to understand the world around them.

Our interest in geography was inspired two years ago when we both received our respective co-ordinator roles and began our investigations into how we could make geography an accessible and enjoyable experience for our pupils. We have thoroughly enjoyed it and found many ways to involve all pupils in the subject – particularly through having visitors from other countries and themed periods such as 'Caribbean week', 'Rugby world cup term' and 'Olympics term'.

Geography as a subject is threaded through many other areas of the curriculum, particularly literacy and numeracy. Pupils have ample opportunities to experience geographical activities throughout the year as well as on a daily basis – by identifying the weather every morning, navigating their way around the school as independently as

possible, and recycling in their classrooms. Pupils' skills broaden to their local community as they develop an understanding of where they come from. This is done by looking at pictures, videos or objects of reference to explore their local community and what it has to offer, understanding where things are from and following their journey.

Through topic work and focus weeks and terms, pupils' geographical experiences increase – we look at and experience places globally through experiential learning, including food tasting, role playing, welcoming visitors from other countries, exploring artefacts and being immersed in different countries through sensory experiences.

Pupils appear to enjoy the subject because we present each geographical topic in a fun, engaging and exploratory



Ty Gwyn pupils face difficulties every day due to their varying disabilities, however they are still able to engage, learn, experience and have fun with geography. Photos © Ty Gwyn Special School.

way, allowing each pupil to experience it at their own pace through a process that they understand best. Pupils use their senses of seeing, smelling, touching, hearing and tasting to help themselves understand the world around them.

Pupils' basic knowledge of global issues is supported through whole-school events, where they raise money for charities (e.g. Save the Children, Send a Cow) and through initiatives such as den building and reading schemes.

As our pupils have a variety of needs and their ability to navigate themselves around the school and local areas differs dramatically some pupils use simple maps, some use memory, while others use electronic wheelchairs they are learning to control for themselves.

To help our pupils learn to the best of their abilities we need to provide them with the right equipment to complete the task. They utilise a range of specialised equipment and technology to communicate, make decisions and take control of their own learning. In addition, our pupils have ample opportunities to undertake fieldwork – both in the school grounds and the local area; educational visits are arranged on a weekly basis for pupils to explore the wider world outside their immediate environment.

Geography gives learners the opportunities to study their role in their immediate surrounding and local environment. The subject allows pupils to appreciate the diverse communities of Wales and the wider world. All teachers provide their pupils with a variety of multi-sensory experiences, which allow them to help make sense of their world and help to develop their curiosity and understanding of people, living things, past events, and so on. Through their senses, teachers encourage pupils to learn through exploration, enquiry and experimentation, whereby they can ask questions and try to find the answers. Teachers also use a variety of teaching approaches including group and individual teaching.

Pupils have a sensory timetable. This utilises the power of the senses to help them understand the days of the week. A specific taste and sound is assigned to each day and these are offered and played to the pupils every morning.

Teachers set up opportunities for pupils to see where local foods come from and to support the pupils in handling different foods in different contexts. During these experiences the teachers can and are able to engage to pupils with the subject through practical experiences and

exploratory tasks, including shopping, milk and fruit deliveries.

Pupils have ample opportunities to make decisions and to contribute through geography. For example, this year we have extended our Forest School area, during which pupils were involved in choosing what plants and flowers they would like. They explored a garden centre by smelling and feeling the plants, so they could make independent choices of what they liked.

For our pupils communication can often be difficult, so we use different means of communication with them through symbols, pictures, gestures and Makaton signs. Our pupils have a variety of different ways to communicate both simple requests and to contribute to decisions and express their opinions. At our school council (which meets once a term), pupils use their own communication methods to contribute to the discussion and to write the minutes. Each pupil is encouraged to give their ideas and opinions on a topic; they may undertake surveys and gather information by asking each class about their chosen issues/topics.

Pupils in the post-16 department take part in regular Enterprise projects throughout the year. During these projects, pupils have plenty of independence to plan what they would like to do, what they will need and where they need to get the materials from, and to obtain the products and build up to creating the crafts themselves (with guidance). Pupils then have the opportunity to sell their output at fairs within school, at events and at other schools. This enables the pupils to take responsibility for the things that they have made, for them to experience complete participation throughout and understanding the 'work' process from start to finish.

Our school has been awarded the Silver Award Quality Mark in Geography by the Geographical Association. Our pupils face challenges every day; however, they continue to engage, learn, experience and have fun with geography; and express their views and opinions on the subject. In order to achieve this, we simplify the curriculum and utilise a multi-sensory approach to allow pupils to experience variety that helps their understanding.

Our advice would be to get creative, simplify tasks, allow pupils the opportunity to explore their local and wider community, and most importantly to have fun. Geography is a huge subject; there is so much to explore – as hard as our pupils work, we are sure they would agree.

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