

A WEEK OF RAIN...

VICTORIA ASPIN

Here, Victoria explains how a week of focused activities were used to enable year 1 pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties to develop their skills and their understanding of rain.

Abbey Court in Medway, Kent, is a school for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties aged 3–19 years (key stages 1–4). The curriculum is flexible and personalised to meet the wide range of learning difficulties and individual needs present at the school. We use a 'spiral' curriculum in geography (and all other subjects) to revisit key concepts throughout each term, aiming to strengthen pupils' understanding. Geography is delivered as part of the offer for all pupils and is taught by non-specialist teachers, co-ordinated by a whole-school subject leader. The subject leader provides coverage plans and schemes of work designed to challenge pupils in relation to their abilities.

The geography curriculum at the school aims to:

- develop pupils' confidence within all areas of geography

- encourage awareness of the pupils' immediate environment and beyond
- stimulate pupil curiosity and interest, and
- allow pupils to participate in a variety of activities that are engaging, relevant and challenging.

When planning activities, teachers always aim to make 'big' concepts relevant and meaningful through real-life sensory experiences. In year 1, pupils work on the topic of weather. This topic covers all curriculum subjects for the term, but lends itself to the delivery of geography in particular.

The concept of identifying daily and seasonal weather changes, first in the UK and subsequently hot and cold areas across the world, is broken down to enable pupils to understand what weather is first. Each week the teacher then plans activities to cover different types of weather in order to develop pupil recognition and understanding of the weather type as well as their functional skills. The first week of the topic focused on rain.

It's raining, it's pouring

Pupils in year 1 are mainly working at the early 'P' levels; therefore, activities used to develop early geography skills included:



Photo © Victoria Aspin.

P2.2: Co-operating with shared exploration

P3.1: Exploring materials in increasingly complex ways

P3.2: Responding to options and choices with actions or gestures

P4: Demonstrating that they know that certain actions will produce predictable results.

To ignite the pupils' interest, to focus and cue them into the geography, the same introduction was used throughout the 'rain' week. The teacher played a video and audio of a rainy day and encouraged them to watch and listen. She explained that they would be learning about weather and asked where the pupils would find weather – giving them the choice of 'outside' or 'inside'. When they had made their choice, the class sang weather-related songs: 'I hear thunder...' and 'It's raining, it's pouring...'.

Pupils and supporting adults then dressed in wet weather coats to begin working outdoors. The teacher had planned for a range of experiential, sensory and focused learning activities. All pupils began by sitting under an umbrella as water was poured from a watering can to enable them to experience and explore the sensation of being rained on (we had been hoping for some real rain that day, but we had to create our own). An important part of learning through experience is reflection time; at Abbey Court this is supported in ways that are appropriate to each pupil.

Next, we developed shared exploration through the use of a range of equipment, which included pouring water over pupils' hands to allow them to feel the sensation of it running through their fingers while listening to the sounds that water makes. Pupils were encouraged to reach towards the flowing water hand-over-hand (with support where appropriate), to pour the water for themselves and to make choices



Photo © Victoria Aspin.



Photo © Victoria Aspin.

(using their individual communication system) on what equipment they would like to use next or how they would like to use it. We introduced sponges to enable pupils to explore the fact that when a sponge becomes saturated it releases water, as does a rain cloud. Throughout the activities, the supporting adults use selected key words and phrases together with visual representations to embed the language of weather.

Some pupils carried out further activities designed to develop their understanding of the water cycle. For example, one experiment uses a clear container filled with water and topped with shaving foam to represent a cloud. Pupils were shown how to use a pipette to drip blue food colouring through the shaving foam and watch as it flows into

the water – this illustrates how rain is released from a saturated cloud.

Throughout the lesson, adults observed pupils and made notes of any successes or challenges, which were then used to inform possible lines of development. Future lessons that would build on the interests of the pupils, and aim to further develop skills and understanding, were planned. This included beginning each 'rain' lesson with the same introduction and devoting time to exploring familiar activities before moving on. In our experience, this repetition is key to pupils' learning and supports a more comprehensive understanding.

We were delighted when one pupil demonstrated his developing recognition of weather. Later, and independently, after looking out of the window and seeing that it was raining, he collected his coat. Another pupil pulled her hand back as a sodden sponge was lifted from a bowl of water, thus showing an anticipation of it dripping on her.

For pupils with severe and profound learning disabilities, practical geography-based activities using multi-sensory approaches encourage an exploration of the world around them. This can begin with recognition of their immediate surroundings and then extended to wider environments and experiences further afield.



Photo © Victoria Aspin.

Victoria Aspin taught in a mainstream school before joining Abbey Court School in 2005. She became EYFS/KS1 leader in 2010 and then progressed to become Deputy Head teacher, with current responsibility for the primary site.

GA Annual Conference and Exhibition University of Manchester, Tuesday 9–Thursday 11 April 2019 'CELEBRATING GEOGRAPHY'

We all think geography matters, and we are passionate about it – that's why we choose to be part of the GA and give our time to promoting the subject. At the current moment it is easy to feel rather downbeat as we fight to champion geography in a crowded and hostile policy landscape, so I think it is time to strike a positive note and remind ourselves of the enormous contribution that geography can make, not only to our own lives but also to the lives of the pupils and students we work with.

As a result, I have chosen 'Celebrating Geography' as my Presidential theme for 2018–19. Come to the 2019 Annual Conference to join in sessions that share classroom success stories, debate curriculum issues, disseminate the latest research findings and explore the fundamental principles that underpin the discipline. The resources exhibition and the unique chance to network add to this heady mix. This is a chance to be inspired by others, exchange ideas and celebrate all that geography has to offer.

Dr Stephen Scoffham,
GA Senior Vice President 2017–18



Get involved

If you're interested in proposing a session for inclusion in the Conference programme please e-mail Lucy Oxley (loxley@geography.org.uk) before the end of June 2018.