

Milton Mount Primary School Leading the flow to equilibrium in education and existence

Summary

The school embarked on its sustainability journey nearly twenty years ago, with the appointment of a new head with a vision of establishing a learning environment based on sound ecological principles. He began by introducing practically based, investigative environmental education, using the school grounds for all year groups and in a range of curriculum areas, while in parallel, introducing the concept of pupil voice. The Rio Earth Summit was a trigger to broaden the vision and ethos of the school to encompass global citizenship and social justice and to develop policies and procedures for energy, staff and financial management based on Agenda 21 proposals.

The head established a clear vision and led by example, using the children's enthusiasm to draw in other staff. As pupils grew in knowledge, awareness and confidence, they gradually assumed more responsibility for leading the sustainability agenda.

Impacts: After several years, the pupils became very knowledgeable about the environment and its importance in their lives. As the concept of sustainability broadened, pupils developed a comprehensive understanding of their roles and responsibilities as global citizens and have had a positive impact on the local community. The school council gradually became more confident and active, addressing more varied and strategic questions and finally taking on responsibility for developing sustainability across the school. New policies reduced gas and electricity use and freed resources. The school is high achieving, with a broad, balanced and creative curriculum, and high pupil motivation.

Key leadership role: Headteacher; pupils

Starting out

The sustainability journey for this school began in 1989 when I was appointed to the post of headteacher. As an ecologist and environmentalist I welcomed the opportunity to establish a learning environment based upon sound ecological principles of working as much as possible in the context of an eco-system. That meant effectively managing the flow of energy, mechanical, resource, intellectual, physical and educational within the school and its inter-related partners.

Setting the vision

All aspects of the school's business from developing learners and thinkers to managing operational elements are seen in the context of the whole picture of ensuring sustainability. As we looked at the relevance and inter-connectivity of the above elements we identified ways to develop sustainable practice and to link the operational parts of the school with its core principles, aims and objectives.

Identifying change agents: who will lead?

The initial difficulty in establishing a sustainable school in those early days

was the fact that the education system was embroiled in the introduction and embedding of the National Curriculum. This meant that teachers, governors, parents and leaders had neither the time, energy nor inclination to see the sense and relevance of becoming sustainable. The one group who were free of these concerns and innately open to the importance of sustainability, were the pupils.

Communicating and interpreting

I decided the best way to start the process was for me to facilitate learning by working with classes and groups, using scientific investigations, Design Technology, ICT and importantly re-introducing into our curriculum environmental education that was "real" investigation and practical. I therefore timetabled myself to teach every year group from Reception to Year 7 (First & Middle School). This work required using the school grounds to support the curriculum and learning. With limited budgets we set about engaging all pupils in activities that created these different outdoor environmental learning opportunities, such as woodland nature trails, ponds and marsh lands.

Innovator/ risk taker

Buildings and grounds

Engaging the reluctant adults (from TA to parent)

Engaging others

Embedded in my objectives was also to start to engage the adults in the school as they saw, firsthand, the benefits of environmental education and use of the outdoor classroom to their teaching and that it was not another new initiative, or a distraction from the onerous demands of the National Curriculum, but a more enjoyable, beneficial and purposeful way of managing it, whilst at the same time offering a broader, more creative learning experience for all. The enthusiasm and attitudes of the children quickly began to draw the adults into the approach.

Connectors – the big picture

Pupil voice

After a couple of years, the pupils became very knowledgeable about the environment, its management, problems and importance in their lives. They also became passionate about it and concerned that they had responsibilities of care towards it. Throughout the years of establishing environmental education and sustainability in the curriculum I was also developing the concept of pupil voice, participation, inclusion and responsibility. In 1992 we established a school council with pupils elected by peers, adults elected by their colleagues, parent volunteers and elected governors.

Promoting student voice

Inclusion and participation

The council gradually became more active, confident and visionary and began to address more varied and strategic questions such as how the school impacts upon the environment, quality of learning and teaching, social and emotional needs of pupils and adults. All this early development was firmly established on the foundation and insights they had gained from the environmental education activities.

Connectors – the big picture

Rio Summit's Agenda 21

Looking outward

As the school council matured, the school was introduced to the findings and recommendations of the UN Rio Summit and the Agenda 21 proposals. We started to consider these proposals and agreed that we should try to adopt all we could as a foundation to our school ethos and vision. We introduced

Setting the vision

Energy and water

Resource provider

energy use policies and procedures, staffing policies and procedures and enhanced working conditions, and financial management procedures to ensure effective and sustainable use of budgets. This meant that we were able to increase expenditure on equipment, on developing the environment and on significantly reducing waste of gas and electricity after regular monitoring of use and waste systems in the school.

Towards the eco-school community

In 2001 the school council took the decision to become a member of the ENCAMS eco-schools community. The school council, established for some nine years, evolved into the school/eco council and set about formalising its eco code and eco elements into its agenda. From that time the eco council has become responsible for the development of sustainability across the school.

Promoting student voice

The benefits of developing a sustainable approach

The pupils of the school have a comprehensive understanding of their roles and responsibilities as citizens and really care about the environment and global issues. They can articulate opinions and construct reasoned arguments around the matter. As a result they are tolerant, outgoing, confident and collaborative young people with a keen sense of justice. Many of these qualities are reflected in the local community, with families making significant contributions to sustainable living in the community and their own homes. The school is a well resourced, high achieving community that has been able to maintain its broad, balanced and creative curriculum and outdoor education. It has maintained a buoyant and healthy financial position with a constant high population and high attendance and pupil motivation.

Looking outward

Inclusion and participation

Local well-being

Major obstacles to address to achieve and maintain sustainability

The most significant obstacle was and remains adults within the school. The scepticism and denial of some was addressed head on by repeatedly highlighting the relevance and reality of sustainability in their professional and personal lives. The most effective tool was engaging staff in considering the changing world and their crucial responsibility to prepare our pupils for a future that is going to be more challenging and different year on year. This approach is used every time we induct new staff to our school. As a high achieving school we also needed to address the fear of risk taking. We have been able to demonstrate that because of our sustainable approach to learning we have not only maintained our academic status, but improved on it.

Communicating and interpreting

Innovator/risk taker

Sustainability for us is a continuous journey, we are on the road and the road has no end, just a series of bends, hills, twists and turns. The excitement of traveling that road will ensure our creativity.

Conclusion

The road to sustainability is a challenge with the pupils helping to lead and inspire others. It only requires a passion and vision from school leaders to inspire and enable others to help young people take responsibility for their future and an environment that will sustain them.