

The John Muir Award in our school grounds at Bellahouston Academy



Murdo MacDonald, Geography Teacher from Bellahouston Academy talks about delivering a John Muir Award for a whole S1 year group as part of the Curriculum for Excellence.

Bellahouston Academy is a non-denominational state-run secondary school in Bellahouston, south-west Glasgow, Scotland.

It has a roll of just under 900 pupils.

Why did you choose to get involved with the John Muir Award?

The school was looking for a framework to deliver the Curriculum for Excellence outdoors, to help make Geography more hands-on, and offer the opportunity for our S1 pupils to work towards a nationally recognised certificate. We also wanted to make better use of the school grounds, and make links with Global Citizenship and Sustainability. The John Muir Award seemed to fit.

How did you start planning the John Muir Award at Bellahouston Academy?

I attended a CPD (Continuing Professional Development) John Muir Award training day in Glasgow, and it was a useful introduction. It helped me gain ideas around the simple activities that engage pupils with nature. It also helped identify ways to plan and deliver a Discovery Award for a whole S1 year group at Bellahouston Academy - which was always going to be a challenge regarding numbers of pupils involved. The breakthrough came when I realised that our own school grounds could be used to deliver the John Muir Award. This allowed me to move away from concern about parental consent forms and travel issues, and instead, with the help of John Muir Award staff, focus purely on content.

How did you integrate the Award into your S1 timetable?

The project was carried out during the school timetable as an integral part of the Geography curriculum with connections being made to other subjects such as Expressive Arts and Science. Pupils spent time during each Geography period up to the summer holidays (over a sustained ten week period) experiencing a green part of the grounds away from the main school building. Additionally, pupils were asked to study a natural area near where they lived as part of their John Muir Award. Scheduling the Award in this way encouraged the pupils to get to know these areas during the spring/summer seasons and discuss the changes that were taking place. Finding out about John Muir and why the John Muir Trust and Award were set up added a context to the project, a reason for their learning.

What did you do?

Pupils looked at improving the habitats for nature in the school grounds. This included planting hedges and wildflowers (such as lavender, sweet rocket, aster and sunflowers), to attract bees, butterflies and birds. Pupils carried out a litter pick, recorded the different types of 'unnatural' things they found and also studied the effects of litter and waste recycling.

They considered the importance of 'taking only photographs, leaving only footprints' – our impact on nature. Pupils shared their work through poetry, drawings, leaf sketches, models and slide shows.

Some selected pupils also ran a workshop session on the John Muir Award for a School Open Day showcasing Global Citizenship Education. The aim was to show how outdoor learning and direct experiences of nature can help 'bring to life' sustainability issues such as biodiversity, pollution, waste management, and health and wellbeing.

"The John Muir Award taught us that there is more to education than sitting in a class and writing. Being outside is a different type of learning."

Robyn Board, Bellahouston Academy Pupil

How did the pupils record what they did?

During each of the lessons pupils used their John Muir Award Record Books to note their findings in any way they wished: drawings, stories, facts, poems and so on. Using the Record Books allowed the pupils to reflect on their own personal experiences and feelings whilst completing a wider group project.

How did you monitor individual engagement?

Due to the large-scale whole school approach to delivering the John Muir Award at Bellahouston Academy, pupils were asked to produce a portfolio (4 or 5 pieces of their choice of work) based around what they have done in lessons. One of these pieces had to be about John Muir. Pupils were told at the start of the project that there would be a closing date for their portfolio. Successful pupil's names were submitted to the John Muir Trust to receive their Discovery Award certificates.



Some of the successful pupils were really creative in interpreting the tasks and challenges. We had a sculpture of John Muir complete with beard and boots, and a linear poem about litter wrapped round a Lucozade bottle that had been found in the school grounds.

Did you meet the aims of the project?

Yes. We think this is the Curriculum for Excellence in action. Using the structure of the John Muir Award helped demonstrate pupil's research, creativity and understanding of environmental issues we encountered. Pupils were out of the classroom for the majority of each Geography period. This 'hands-on' approach to learning is something that they really enjoyed. We also found out anecdotally that outdoor learning helped the pupils concentrate better in later classes.

How are you hoping to build on your John Muir Award?

We are delivering the John Muir Award each year with the entire S1 cohort. We found last year that structure was the key, in that each lesson had to have well planned outcomes to allow pupils to work towards a John Muir Award at Bellahouston Academy. We have begun work on the John Muir Award a little earlier this year to allow more time for work on the individual pupil portfolios. The John Muir Award is an excellent introduction to outdoor learning for our S1 pupils.

"It was good and helped us realise that there is more to life than gadgets, as it helped us get out and about." Jennifer Goldstein, Bellahouston Academy Pupil