How dirty hands raise attainment: a local greenspace partnership

Cadder Primary School – Autumn 2018

Getting hands on with nature is the result of a partnership dedicated to widening opportunities for pupils, helping them to overcome their anxieties about spending time outdoors and learn to embrace curiosity, creativity and play.

A local partnership approach

A minibeast held in a muddy hand might not be a standard sign of a successful learning outcome, but for many pupils at Cadder Primary School, it's a fantastic demonstration of how far they've come.

Cadder Primary School, situated in the north of Glasgow, proudly boasts a whole school nurturing ethos. Teacher Kaukab Stewert was looking to refresh her approach to engaging P7 pupils in their own learning in a way that would also benefit their health and wellbeing. Spending more time taking learning outdoors was a natural choice, leading to a partnership with Lambhill Stables - a local social enterprise and community hub which provides experiential learning opportunities through its allotment space on the Forth and Clyde Canal in Glasgow.

Utilising school grounds and then local community growing spaces at the Stables opened up opportunities for the pupils to expand their horizons and progress learning beyond the school gate. Reading, writing, drawing and maths were all integrated into their outdoor sessions, with a cross- curricular approach helping create a varied programme of activities, including sketching and building natural sculptures, undertaking litter and soil surveys, and taking action to encourage more wildlife into the school grounds.

> "None of the kids would get their hands dirty when we first started working with [them]. Now we've even got a number of students committed to the Environment and Youth Group sessions outside of school time!"
>
> Kelvin Archer, Lambhill Stables

Finding connections with nature through pupil-led learning

In the early days of the partnership, feeling comfortable with 'getting dirty hands' was an element that many children struggled with, with anxieties over hands-on tasks and being up close with wildlife. Having a focus for their activities through the John Muir Award was found to help, adding a sense of purpose to lessons and providing an over-arching structure to learning experiences. Over time, students' willingness to get fully involved and engage with nature increased, with handling plants, picking up bugs and chatting to younger students about their learning becoming the norm.

Encouraging individual reflection had also proved an initial challenge. Adopting a pupil-

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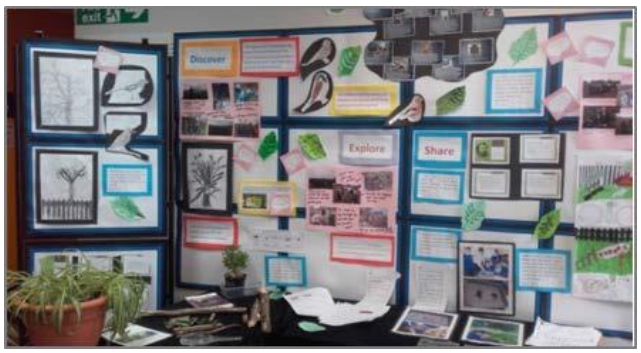
led approach to learning, by taking time to just be in nature with no set agenda, delivered strong benefits, boosting students' confidence and happiness in observing and investigating their surroundings.

To the surprise of teaching and delivery staff, this resulted in a new sense of appreciation of the outdoors, with students requesting to design and create a new garden space specifically for relaxation and reflection, complete with a special 'peace bench'. Self-reflection on the health and wellbeing benefits that can be gained from spending time outdoors also increased, with pupils noting:

"I like being able to go outdoors because it's relaxing and I like the fresh air"

"I like seeing the bugs in the hotel and I like being allowed to just chill"



Getting results to raise attainment

Over the course of the project, staff at both organisations noticed real changes. The partnership approach was recognised as effective in supporting students emotionally, behaviourally and socially throughout the sessions. Most notably, increased levels of self-confidence shone through as the pupils relaxed into and learned more about outdoor spaces. As initial individual levels of anxiety reduced, group dynamics calmed, allowing pupils to feel more comfortable with each other, work well in groups and develop personal and academic skills which some of them may have struggled with inside the classroom.

Receiving their John Muir Award certificates helped cement the pupils' sense of achievement, providing something tangible that, along with their muddy hands, they can look back on and take pride in their efforts to get outdoors and do something positive to care for their local wild places.

Beyond your Boundary

www.beyondyourboundary.scot

This Scottish Natural Heritage resource will help you find, access and make the most of greenspaces in your local environment.

Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba
nature.scot

Find out more about the John Muir Award at johnmuirtrust.org/award