



Get Out

Developing your school's surroundings isn't just about sprucing up the playground, says Bruce Potts, new areas should be built into the curriculum too...

If you want to find out more about improving your school grounds or you'd like to have an inset day to help you develop your new curriculum or improve your grounds you can contact Bruce on bruce_bp@hotmail.com

There's been a lot of talk recently about the primary curriculum, with Jim Rose and Robin Alexander producing two very different (but in many ways similar) critiques of the current arrangements and both suggesting ways of creating a new framework during the coming years. Many schools have already embarked on the process of developing a more exciting, innovative and stimulating curriculum, and this often involves realising the potential of the school grounds to provide memorable learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

Apart from enriching the curriculum, there's another good reason to spend more time outdoors and it's to do with children's exposure to nature. A recent survey by the National Trust found that only half of Britain's children could identify an oak leaf while one in three could not recognise our

best known butterfly, the red admiral. Carry out a survey of which common garden birds your children can identify – I think you'll be shocked at the results.

Your school grounds may be the best, and most underused, facility available to you and could have the potential to become a wonderful resource for learning across the whole curriculum. If you decide to improve your school grounds there are a number of things to remember:

- Rome wasn't built in a day, so don't expect to make major changes without accepting that it will take time
- There is a cost implication for almost anything you decide to do, but don't ever let cost prevent you from doing something amazing for your children – if they deserve it you'll find a way to raise the money!
- Improvements are more likely to be successful

if you have a small group of committed individuals who are passionate about it and are prepared to act as the organising/steering committee for the whole project

- Link up with a health and safety expert who can guide you and work alongside you throughout the process (enquire through your Local Authority)
- Be bold!
- Be original – if you don't want to end up with something that looks very similar to what other schools have, be prepared to spend time creating your own designs without the aid of catalogues.
- Make sure that every transformation you make in the project has a clear educational and philosophical rationale behind it – i.e. there is a clear purpose in why you have done it that way

1 Take time to plan

Before making any changes at all, spend time consulting (with local, regional and national organisations who have experience of this kind of thing), researching (visit as many places as you can that have already done what you are trying to do) and planning very carefully all the changes you want to make. Everything should be carefully costed and a chronological time-scale produced. Part of your plan should include the maintenance arrangements for the new facilities (who, when, how and at what cost). Be prepared for your improvements to take a considerable time – nothing should be rushed for the sake of expediency. This planning process may take as long as a year in itself.

2 Build projects into the curriculum

If you create a new wildlife area and 'hope' that teachers will use it when they have time, it could easily become unused and redundant because they are so busy it's difficult for them to find 'extra' time to visit it. A major curriculum unit of work centred around butterflies in one particular year group (say, Y3) should ensure that the wildlife area gets used regularly and that every child will carry out a butterfly study during their time in the school.

3 Create permanent features

Have you considered the idea of 'permanence', where items created as a direct result of curricular work later become a feature of the school itself? For example, you could build in a workshop for Y5 children as part of their D&T programme in which they produce a mosaic somewhere in the school, perhaps on a wall at the end of a corridor or in the school entrance hall. This mosaic remains in place. Next year's Y5 create a mosaic somewhere else in the school so that over time there will be a number of mosaic features around your grounds. You can do the same in other year groups with paintings, sculptures (create a sculpture garden somewhere in the school grounds), wall hangings, batik etc.

4 Leave a trail

Design a science trail around your school grounds which has ten activity points (this could be a pin board or a protected box). Each of these points has an instruction for children to follow (e.g. find leaves which have fallen from three different trees. Identify the names of the trees and sketch the leaves in your sketch book). You can design 'sets' of instructions in different areas of study and at differing levels of difficulty. Do the same for PE, Maths, English or any other subject.

5 Grow your own

Create a garden area in which children can grow their own vegetables. Do this either for just one year group or set aside an area for every year group. Don't do this as an optional gardening club but build it into the curriculum. Perhaps Y6 children could have a 'Seed to Plate' programme in which they grow, tend, harvest and cook their vegetables as part of a recipe they have prepared, which they then serve to their classmates.

6 Dip in

Build a pond which can safely and easily be used by children for as much of the year as possible. Incorporate a pond study into the Y2 curriculum – there is so much work that can be done across the curriculum with this as your central theme.

7 Please everyone

Does football dominate your play areas at break times? Carry out a full survey of all aspects of play and the space available to your children and start the process of designing a wonderful play space which serves the needs of all your children, not just the footballers!

8 Make dens

Children just love 'dens'. Find areas around your school where you can create dens. These can be constructed out of wood, canvas, willow, fencing materials or even brick. Use your imagination to create some lovely areas for children to play, read or just sit and think.

9 Choose the right path

Create pathways around the school which have points of interest along them, such as a small bridge (Three Billy Goats Gruff), a tunnel, sensory opportunities (lavender or mint), outdoor musical instruments, railings for running sticks along etc.

10 Go back to nature

- If you have the space, consider providing:
- Bird boxes in which garden birds can nest
 - Bat boxes for the study and understanding of these beautiful creatures
 - Log piles for studying minibeasts
 - A butterfly garden with different plants flowering from March to October to attract butterflies almost all year round
 - A weather station to measure temperature, sunlight, rainfall and wind speed/direction
 - Chickens, and arrangements for incubating chicks
 - A 'bug' hotel
 - A wormery

There is so much you can do to bring learning to life in your school and I hope these suggestions get you thinking about just how you make better use of your school grounds in the future.

Plan a major curriculum unit around butterflies in one particular year group