

# Acorns and trailblazers: a journey

**Emma Vyvyan** of Sky Primary and Eden Project Nursery describes how she has built a school with nature at its core

**S**ky Primary and Eden Project Nursery, based near St Austell in Cornwall, is part of Kernow Learning Trust (21 primary schools across Cornwall) and opened in September 2022 as part of the UK Department for Education free school programme. The school building is net zero carbon in construction and located in the heart of a new eco-homes development.

The school began its journey with a clear vision to deliver an enriching and innovative curriculum that emphasises nature-inspired learning, sustainability, climate awareness, and global citizenship. Recognising the importance of connecting children with nature and the environment, the school aims to create a learning atmosphere that not only imparts academic knowledge but also fosters a sense of responsibility towards the planet.

With the school being newly established, children join the Nursery from age 3; the school will eventually grow to have full classes up to year 6 (ages 10–11). Each academic year, the ‘first little acorns’, the first cohort, will be the trailblazers; by 2028 the school will have all year groups in place.

While we follow the Early Years Framework and National Curriculum for England, learning beyond the classroom is our overarching vision and the teaching



team is developing the curriculum around this golden thread. This does not mean that core subjects and learning are diluted, rather it gives us a fantastic opportunity to teach through a context that creates better connections with our environment and planet.

## Our curriculum design

The curriculum has several key motivations:

- **Connection to nature.** Understanding that children learn best when they can relate their experiences to the world around them, the curriculum was designed to immerse pupils in the natural environment. This approach helps cultivate curiosity and a sense of wonder about the world.
- **Sustainability education.** With increasing concerns about climate change and environmental degradation, the curriculum aims to equip children with the knowledge and skills necessary to tackle these challenges. By integrating sustainability into everyday learning, pupils are encouraged to think critically about their impact on the planet.
- **Holistic development.** The nature-inspired curriculum supports the development of the whole child, intellectually, emotionally and socially. It promotes wellbeing through outdoor learning and physical activity, which are essential for healthy development.
- **Engagement and motivation.** By incorporating nature into lessons, the curriculum enhances engagement and motivation among pupils. Learning becomes more dynamic and interactive, leading to better retention of knowledge.



▲ A Nursery child exploring growing seeds

## The benefits

Our observations so far are that children who spend time outdoors become more curious and resilient learners. The benefits to children of learning outside, and enquiry-based environments, are extensive, including these key emotional health and wellbeing benefits (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Better physical health, growth and development.
- Numerous opportunities to strengthen/refine motor skills.
- Connection to nature and respect for it – learning in, from, about and for the natural environment.
- Promotion of creativity and the capacity to learn.
- Stronger verbal and social skills.
- Increased collaboration, communication, team-working, listening, discussion, debates, planning, decision-making, etc.
- More opportunities for scientific exploration, knowledge development and geographical fieldwork.
- Stimulation of senses.
- Improvement in pupil behaviour and positive attitudes to learning.
- Improvement in mental health and emotional development.
- Promotion of social inclusion.



▲ Learning about foraging to make healthy food in Reception

## The co-benefits

The school's attendance record is consistently above the national average, with persistent absence well below national levels. While we cannot make a secure correlation, staff attribute this to learning provision that ensures children are offered a purposeful, exceptional and unique, nature-inspired everyday experience at school. Teachers are developing a curriculum enhanced by a commitment to sustainability and the Good Life Goals ([www.goodlifegoals.org](http://www.goodlifegoals.org)) – a values-based education promoting confident, independent children motivated to make a positive change to their community and planet.

The school approaches this through:

- guided and direct teaching;
- enquiry-based learning;
- focusing on local, national and global themes;
- pushing out the classroom walls;
- celebrating children's learning through 'great works' events engaging the school community.

## A sense of belonging and inclusion

The school recognises that all children are unique in terms of characteristics, interests, abilities, experience, motivation and learning needs. Staff value and take account of this diversity, providing access to high-quality and appropriate education and training for all members of their school community. The school



▲ Year 2 children creating bee hotels as they learn about the importance of bees

is committed to the full inclusion of all children, ensuring pupils with SEND are supported to achieve their potential and become the best that they can be. Curriculum development is an ever-evolving activity. Set in an area of high multiple deprivation, the school is passionate about outcomes for children deemed disadvantaged and those with SEND. Learning time is precious and, when designing learning, staff are always mindful to consider the following:

- **Stress reduction.** Spending time in nature has been shown to reduce cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and lower heart rate, contributing to overall stress reduction. For children with SEND who may be more prone to stress or have difficulty regulating their emotions, exposure to nature can provide a natural outlet for relaxation and emotional release.
- **Physical activity.** Nature-inspired learning often involves physical activities such as walking, gardening or exploring outdoor spaces. Engaging in physical activity outdoors can improve mood, boost self-esteem, and enhance overall physical health, which are all important factors in promoting emotional wellbeing.
- **Connection to the environment.** Building connections with the natural world can foster a sense of belonging, purpose and interconnectedness. For children with SEND, who may sometimes feel isolated or disconnected, nature-inspired learning offers opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with the environment and with others.
- **Promotion of curiosity and exploration.** Nature-inspired learning encourages curiosity, exploration and discovery. For children with SEND, who may have unique learning needs or preferences, engaging

with the natural world can provide a supportive and inclusive learning environment where they can explore at their own pace and in their own way.

- **Opportunities for social interaction.** Nature-based activities often promote collaborative learning and teamwork, providing opportunities for children with SEND to develop social skills, communication and cooperation in a supportive and inclusive environment.
- **Sense of achievement.** Engaging in hands-on activities in nature, such as meaningful maths, gardening or building outdoor structures, can provide a sense of accomplishment and mastery. For children with SEND, who may sometimes face academic or social challenges, experiencing success in nature-based activities can boost self-confidence and self-esteem.

## A focus on the child

Our school's vision is that the children are happy, healthy, successful learners with a deep understanding of what it means to live in harmony with the world and their role in achieving that. As learners they will make progress from their starting points and achieve at least in line with the national age-related expectations.

Our staff know that engaging families is all-important and attendance at every half term's 'great works' event, family cake-and-chat sessions, family review meetings, reading at home and school-gate discussions, all indicate community support and involvement with learning, progress and celebrating success together.

The work at Sky Primary and Eden Project Nursery demonstrates that incorporating nature-inspired, connected learning into educational settings plays a crucial role in promoting the emotional health and wellbeing of all children, including those with SEND, by providing a supportive, inclusive and holistic approach to learning and development.

As many colleagues currently observe, young children joining school are finding toileting, behaviour, and PSED age expectations a challenge. So, ensuring opportunities for meaningful connections, play-based learning, promoting curiosity and championing creativity are all essential components in an environment that focuses on emotional health and wellbeing. Indeed, staff at the school also report increase in enthusiasm and passion for teaching with nature at the heart of learning.

In summary, Sky's approach provides access to nature-inspired learning incorporating a rich sensory environment (indoors and outdoors) with diverse

opportunities, including textures, colours, sounds and scents. For children with SEND, particularly those with sensory-processing difficulties, exposure to nature can

help regulate their sensory systems, provide physical gross/fine motor skills opportunities, reduce stress/anxiety, and increase relaxation.

## Reflections on our first few years

- **Curriculum development.** The curriculum has evolved to include a strong focus on environmental education, integrating subjects like geography, science and literacy with nature-based themes. This has allowed pupils to explore topics such as ecosystems, biodiversity and climate change in a meaningful context. To encompass all subjects in this approach the school has produced a Nature Inspired Curriculum Progression to ensure coverage and layering of learning from nursery to year 6.
- **Outdoor learning initiatives.** The school has implemented various outdoor learning initiatives, including eco-club and gardening projects. These activities not only provide practical experiences but also foster teamwork and collaboration among pupils.
- **Community engagement.** Sky Primary has actively engaged with the local community to promote sustainability. Partnerships with local environmental organisations have facilitated workshops and events that connect pupils with broader conservation efforts. The school is the first to achieve Plastic Free Schools accreditation.
- **Professional development for staff.** Recognising the importance of effective teaching, the school has invested in professional development for staff, focusing on outdoor education and sustainability practices. This ensures that teachers are well-equipped to deliver the nature-inspired curriculum effectively. The unique partnership with the Eden Project ensures interactions with experts, while teachers also collaborate with Learning Through Landscapes, Harmony Project and Climate Adapted Pathways for Education (CAPE).
- **Positive impact on learning outcomes.** Initial assessments indicate that pupils are showing increased enthusiasm for learning, improved attendance rates and a greater understanding of environmental issues. Core learning progression and attainment in maths, reading and writing is at least good when compared with national data. The focus on oracy and vocabulary development, as part of the curriculum, has also enhanced communication skills across subjects.
- **Inclusive approach.** The curriculum is designed to be inclusive, ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have access to nature-based learning experiences. This commitment aligns with the school's values of nurturing and connecting with the community.

## Conclusion

Our school's journey towards a nature-inspired curriculum reflects a commitment to fostering a generation of environmentally conscious, curious and engaged global citizens. By integrating sustainability into the educational framework, the school is not only enhancing academic outcomes but also preparing children to be active participants in creating a better future for our planet. The significant developments over the past couple of years highlight the school's dedication to continuous improvement and the holistic development of every child.

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