



Dromore Nursery School

Development of an outdoor learning environment

Dromore Nursery School is located in the town of Dromore, County Down. The school is at full capacity and operates with one full-time and two part-time classes.

This case study focuses on the growth and development of the outdoor learning environment.

The school was inspected in April 2017 and found to have a high level of capacity for sustained improvement. All key areas including outcomes for learners, quality of provision and leadership and management were found to be outstanding.

The inspection highlighted many strengths including the richly resourced, well-structured and organised learning environment. The outdoor learning environment was highlighted as a particular strength.

Outdoor learning

Dromore Nursery School opened in 2002 and the current Principal has led the staff team, governors and school community to develop an all-inclusive learning environment. Integral to this has been the development of the outdoor learning environment as an outdoor classroom.

The principle underpinning the outdoor classroom is that it has equal value to the indoor classroom. This is shared by staff, governors and the school community.

The outdoor classroom is open all day. It is multifunction with features including a fixed wooden train structure (used as a climbing frame and for role play, stories and songs), an outdoor house with wheelchair access, a willow dome, sand and water areas, an art area, a storytelling chair and a woodwork area.

Authentic natural resources are utilised. For example in the woodwork area, children are taught to use real hammers and saws. Water is collected in butts as part of the school's eco-system.

The outdoor classroom is used in all weathers with few exceptions and children can move freely throughout the whole session from outdoors to indoors and avail of a snack whenever they choose.

The school has found that the outdoor learning environment is particularly good for most boys' learning in that it facilitates well the development of gross and fine motor skills.

Interacting with animals and wildlife

Wild animals including hedgehogs, squirrels, birds and mini-beasts in a bug hotel are accommodated in the outdoor environment. The school has a number of pets such as terrapins, guinea pigs, stick insects and fish. Annually chicks and butterflies are hatched. The butterflies are released into the planted area in the outdoor classroom.

The school is supported by the local farming community who have, on occasions, brought lambs and piglets into the school. In addition, the children enjoy visits from the Belfast Zoo Outreach team who bring snakes and lizards/

Children are thus able to learn about and develop a healthy respect for living things through first-hand experiences.

Enhancing experiences

To supplement the children's learning experiences in the outdoor classroom, all children have the opportunity to visit the Woodlands School, Peatlands, Dungannon on a termly basis to participate in activities that deepen their outdoor sensory learning experiences.

Underpinning all of this is the core principle that all children's needs are met in an environment fit for purpose.

The Principal and staff are committed to developing first-hand learning, using natural resources to develop sensory experiences and ultimately allow the children to learn in an environment that is right for them.

Managing risk

One of the main challenges in the development of the outdoor classroom was managing risk.

The development of a mind-set of learning by doing and of taking a risk in a safe environment was something that the Principal addressed with parents and governors through training and the school's policy for adventurous play.

Children learn by doing – by climbing trees, trudging through mud, using real hammers and saws. Children are taught to be independent and to take managed risks.

The importance of planning

Key to the success of the outdoor classroom is meticulous planning. A protected weekly two hour planning session is set aside to evaluate and plan for all children's learning needs.

All teaching staff, nursery assistants and SEN assistants are involved; they feed into the evaluation and planning process and all opinions are valued equally.

Creative and innovative activities for both the indoor and outdoor classroom are planned to meet weekly learning outcomes.

Spontaneous learning is also valued and adults take their lead from the children. For example if a child finds a feather, this can lead to further development of the children's enquiry skills. Their curiosity plus investigative and problem solving skills are encouraged through questioning, discussion and the use of books.

Building the capacity of staff, parents and governors

Continuing professional development and training for all staff has been integral and essential in deepening the understanding and value of how the outdoor environment contributes to learning.

Since the school opened, the Principal has continually led training both within the school and across other settings for staff, parents and governors.

At the beginning of the year parents and governors are invited to an evening of training, a participatory session where they have hands-on experience of an outdoor practical session.

This is very worthwhile in that they can experience the value of the outdoor learning experiences and the benefits for their children.

The school keeps the development of the outdoor classroom under constant review and will continue to evaluate and adapt to suit all children's learning needs.

A planned development, as part of the Shared Education programme, is to undertake training in play therapy and disseminate and integrate strategies, as appropriate, into the outdoor learning environment.

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