



George Betts Primary Academy

Totem Garden

A group of year 3 children were commissioned by their school Principal to take on the challenge of designing a new outdoor learning space for their learning community. They responded to the brief by organising themselves into a creative design team and demonstrated abilities, talents and skills usually associated with experienced, qualified adults. After an inspirational adventure on Lickey Hills and a hands on experience at Martineau Gardens, the children took embraced the challenge, took risks and produced extraordinary outcomes. This summary provides a brief overview of this fantastic project and for more information and to see the children in action visit: www.georgebettsprimaryacademy.com

‘A mind that is stretched by a new experience
can never go back to its old dimensions’
Oliver Wendell Holmes



Universal Learning Ltd

Universal Learning Ltd are an award winning creative team specialising in the design and build of 21st century sustainable buildings and to raising standards in education. For the last five years the team have been consistently rated outstanding by Ofsted for their educational work and were recently announced as the winners of the prestigious 2015 UK Best Inclusive Building; Design and Build Excellence Award for their KEMP Hospice project. The building was opened by HRH The Duke of Kent in June 2015.

‘It has been an inspiration to work with this outstanding group and I confidently predict that in the future, every single one of them is capable of achieving anything they set their mind to’

Paul Hawkins MD, Universal Learning Ltd

My son has really enjoyed learning outdoors and all the different activities have been inspirational for him and I want to continue supporting this project and will be encouraging other parents to join in.’

Parent

Totem Garden Project Summary Summer Term 2015



Background

George Betts Primary Academy is a caring, disciplined and happy environment. Pupils are provided with many opportunities to develop spiritually, socially, physically and intellectually in order to ensure that we are all ‘Learning for Life’. The school is rated outstanding by Ofsted and is in the top 3% of all schools in the country for pupil progress.

The site has many mature trees and substantial green outdoor space and it was decided by the senior leadership (SLT) to explore the possibility creating a flexible outdoor learning area that could also be an environment for enriching relationships with families.

‘Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher.’
William Wordsworth



Process

In an ever changing world it is widely recognised that we are currently educating children in primary settings and preparing them for a world of career opportunities in jobs that haven’t been invented yet. Therefore the development of key skills is an essential part of learning and teaching in the 21st century.

This project was driven by children leading and taking responsibility for their learning and in doing so developing a wide range of transferable skills that enable to understand how they learn. They demonstrated respectful communication skills, processed complex information, worked as a team, used critical thinking, took risks, solved multi layered problems, thought creatively and innovatively and demonstrated on many occasions a very high level of resilience.

Outcomes

The body of work produced by the children over the summer term has been prolific and is documented in print and broadcast media. They designed, created and installed a sculpture garden within the school grounds that would not look out of place at the front of the TATE gallery!

They used a wide range of techniques and tools to transform cylindrical sections of timber into works of art and they planned and organized a celebratory opening for their parents and families. They also designed and installed a ‘Beastie Hotel’ to attract wildlife, a structural ‘Brise Soleil’, a Growing Room, an Orchard and a Mini Allotment inspired by their first hand experience of a beehive for horticultural activities.

Introduction

The SLT instigated a meeting with the managing director of Universal Learning Ltd (ULL) to explore the spatial possibilities and discuss how a project could be linked to the curriculum.

The research question for the project emerged and Year 3 children were given the brief of “Can you design a new outdoor learning space that can be a flexible space for learning and act as a base for family”. The pre-project planning was completed by teachers, SLT & the creative team from ULL and the project was anchored into the spring and summer terms and linked to core curriculum subjects.

Your deepest roots are in nature. No matter who you are, where you live, or what kind of life you lead, you remain irrevocably linked with the rest of creation’
Charles Cook

Research & Development

The children immediately understood that they were in charge of leading this project and grasped the enormity of the challenge. The highly skilled (consistently rated outstanding by Ofsted) creative team from ULL enabled the children to be the key decision makers throughout this process and their first big decision was to conduct active research. They had the idea of going to Martineau Community Gardens to experience horticulture and a bio-diverse environment and included a walk and picnic lunch on Lickey Hills in the itinerary to get close to nature and see sculpture.

Impact on Learning

The impact upon learning can be discussed in three timeframes of short, medium and long term. The immediate impacts were visible and documented at every session as every child was fully engaged and all differential levels within the group were seen to be making valuable and relevant contributions.

The medium term impact included an improvement in performance and understanding of the core subjects as the complex maths around architectural design, structural integrity and engineering was above KS2 curriculum and the various challenges around writing for purpose; for blogs, press releases, annotated drawings etc stretched vocabularies and introduced new words. The longer term will be seen in the next academic year as the children return to school after the summer break and retain and continue to develop their heightened skills. The staff team will also as a result of their CPD linked to this project be able to implement the techniques used by ULL to facilitate engagement, attainment and children leading their learning.



Ideas Generation

The children returned inspired and set about generating ideas with a vigorous and collaborative approach and enormous enthusiasm for the task at hand. They realised their own individual and shared potential and started to think of themselves as designers, artists and structural engineers.

They also had the idea of creating a sculptural installation at their school to represent the shared values of their learning community. They also saw themselves as artists and confidently predicted that they could produce high quality work inspired by the wooden sculptures they experienced on Lickey Hills.

Next Steps

The Totem Garden represents the Year 3 children’s visionary design and in the next academic year the aim is to see the space used for learning, social and recreational activities and also as a base to develop relationships with parents and carers.

The school also aim to share this example of best practice with their network of schools and any other interested parties. They also hope to maintain their excellent working relationship with ULL and use this partnership to support the ongoing commitment of the school to excellence and raising standards of learning and teaching.



‘One should pay attention to even the smallest crawling creature for these too may have a valuable lesson to teach us.’
Black Elk