

Final Report Practice Development Grant, Promoting ecological understanding through engagement with gardening in the nursery and infant age group.

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Overview

Annan School is a Froebelian independent kindergarten and primary school in East Sussex. The purpose of this project was to promote ecological understanding through engagement with gardening in the nursery and infant age group. In order to create a sustainable gardening eco-schools initiative, we planned to expand the Froebelian occupation of gardening.

Before the project, we had gardening beds for every age group, but the staff didn't feel they had the knowledge or experience to be sure they could help children grow properly and comprehend the growing process. The practitioner who led the project works at Annan as a Forest School Teacher and has extensive personal knowledge in this area and is a trained Froebelian.

The aim of the project was to integrate gardening into the whole school community and connect children, hands on, to the growing process. We implemented a dedicated gardening day each week for Infant Classes and Kindergarten to work on their own garden beds and the whole school grounds. One of the strands of the project was ecological self-sustainability. Through this we installed several water butts, started making our own compost, saving our seeds, creating space for wildlife and hosting an eco-fair to educate the community. We also held a community gardening day. Froebelian Outcomes:

The children have developed a sense of the unity of life, they have made bug houses, frog house, hedgehog homes and planted for wildlife. They have also been part of the process of waste fruit and veg turning into compost and seeds turning into fruit, flowers and vegetables. Children have been given many opportunities to develop relationships with the natural world and to see how we can effect positive change, such as attracting bugs, insects and pollinators.

Froebel believed everything in the universe is connected, children had first-hand experience of the cycle of life, from their vegetable peelings, to compost back to growing produce to cook and eat. This was also an opportunity to further the children and teacher's active learning and understanding of ecological processes through a joyful curious approach to engaging with nature.

We hope to share this project with other educators in the Spring and Summer of 2023 as well as to invite the community in for seed to table workshops.

Children's Voice:

- Compost - "How did the worms get here?" "I love using the Wheelbarrows"
- Leaf mould made from fallen leaves - "That's magic!" "The plants will love this compost"
- Whilst we were looking at different types of seeds "Look how the seeds fly in the wind"
- Digging up potatoes - "We've found treasure!"

This project was designed with several objectives in mind:

- To develop the Froebelian occupation of gardening and set up a sustainable gardening aspect to the eco schools' project.
- We proposed to involve parents and the local community in the project, especially with help in growing and cooking organic vegetables and making an herb garden in order to use the herbs to make healing balms.
- We planned to work towards our Silver eco schools award by introducing more sustainable practice, such as water collection and making our own compost and using renewable resources.
- We hoped that the gardening project would develop the children's sense of unity and connectedness with the cycles of life. We planned to take children on the journey of seed to table and waste to compost.
- We proposed to hold open garden events and invite local community groups as an on-going opportunity to disseminate our experiences.
- We hoped that through the project staff would feel inspired to keep the focus of gardening after the grant funding ended. We aimed to create a culture whereby the children learned the skills and were inspired to create a more sustainable future.

Achievements

We were successful in creating a focus on gardening throughout the school and a feeling that we all belonged to the garden and it was all of our responsibility.

We were challenged by Covid and unable to attend courses and were not able to invite the local community groups to school for open days or involve them in workdays. We had groups who wanted to attend but were unable to, so we are hoping they will come this spring instead.

We did successfully include our parent body in the project and had a weekly parent helper throughout the year and held a school gardening day of clearing, transplanting and planting seeds. This was well attended and a great success as it brought a sense of connectedness between home and school.

We were successful in our eco schools project and although the silver award had been replaced, we went through the guidelines for the new award and worked through what was relevant for us.

As a result of this we installed several water butts around school and set up a composting system to include all the waste from fruit snacks and the vegetable peelings from the school cooks as well as general gardening waste. We held an eco-fair to highlight good practice of reducing, recycling and re-using which was well attended and created a wonderful atmosphere of positivity that we were making a difference. We also teamed up with a local tree planting group and planted a forest on local community land which the children and parents will always have access to and will help look after in perpetuity.

Our learning

The key Froebelian success was that the children experienced the cycle of life and the unity of all life. They successfully made compost with thousands of worms which we put on the gardening beds, this helped the children to have a richer understanding of the life cycles of plants and animals through direct experiences.

The school cooks were also delighted to have made a difference by composting their peelings each week. We made leaf mould from the fallen leaves which over a year turned into leaf mould which we put on our beds, the children who put the leaves in bags were amazed to see its transformation. We are now bagging up this autumn's leaf fall.

We planted from seeds they had collected and harvested at the end of the growing season. The children now have their own forest which they have access to visit with school and their parents which is a beacon of hope for our future.

Through the eco fair we made links with a professional composter in our school community who we will work with in the future to improve our composting system further. Our Infant gardens are very shaded compared to our junior beds so some flowers did not appear until the autumn. We have now planned the planting of the infant garden according to the light it receives and have cut back bushes in the kindergarten garden.

The gardening day was a great success and this will now be a yearly event, as will the Eco-fair. We held a school-wide sponsored run event to help pay for the bicycle smoothie maker at the Eco-fair and the purchase and installation of water butts and future costs towards the composting system we are putting in place.

Outcomes

Sustainability:

The children use the water butts in the kindergarten and infant gardens on a daily basis in their play. We have instigated an eco-fair which disseminates the principles we are striving for to the school community.

Unity of life- the children have achieved a sense of the unity of life, they have made bug houses, frog house, hedgehog homes and planted for wildlife.

They have also been part of the process of waste fruit and veg turning into compost and seeds turning into fruit, flowers and vegetables. Garden focus- we have achieved a joined-up feeling of the garden at school being a whole and not just belonging to individual classes.

Ecological literacy:

We installed several water butts to recycle rain water and understand renewable resources. We have shown children how important stewardship of the land is through gardening and planting a forest. Children have a deeper understanding of where seeds come from and pollination. We are helping children to create a more sustainable future by engaging with nature. We have given them opportunities to see renewable resources in action. We have written a visual gardening diary and a monthly blog.

Gardening:

Through gardening, children have been part of the Froebelian principles of Unity of Life and Connectedness by engaging with nature.

The whole school has the opportunity to participate in gardening through starting a gardening after-school-club. The children are more aware of and have a greater understanding of the growing process, they have had successes and failures due to natural and human-effects and have used their produce to make snacks in cookery, on the fire and contribute to soups and salads.

Staff Expertise:

Staff knowledge, expertise and confidence have grown. Practitioners gained a better understanding of their role as knowledgeable, nurturing adults. Staff were keen to be involved in the project and many gained the confidence to try things out with their classes and renewed their enthusiasm for, or embarked upon more sustainable practices.

Community involvement:

We have not had the opportunity to become a centre of excellence as our groups and open days have been postponed to the spring of 2023. We were successful in parents sharing their gardening knowledge and having dedicated garden helpers but we were unable to invite them inside the building to help with cooking the produce, we hope to remedy this in summer of 2023

Eco award:

We did not apply to the eco award but took up the principles enshrined in the award and created an eco-fair to promote sustainable and ecological practise.

Unity:

We were successful in promoting the Froebelian principles of unity, connectedness and community involvement. Staff are more confident and knowledgeable about engaging in the wider context of gardening, including making bug houses and re-wilding the grounds. Children have been given many opportunities to bond with the natural world and to see how we can effect positive change, such as attracting bugs, insects and pollinators and making their own compost. Children have successfully experienced the cycle of seed to table and thoroughly enjoyed the fruits of theirs and natures work.