

Case study: Tackling the climate emergency agenda in a SEND school

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Case study: Tackling the climate emergency agenda in a SEND school

Lee Jowett and Jane Hutton report from Nether Hall School, a special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) school in Leicester that is leading the way on teaching and learning in climate education.

As many will be aware, the Department for Education (DfE) released its climate change and sustainability strategy in April 2022. This provides an opportunity for all education settings to undertake teaching and learning in climate education, whilst taking a whole-school approach (Department for Education, 2022).

For the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) sector there are additional challenges and opportunities in delivering this exciting strategy and enabling students to play an active role in climate action and citizenship.

Nether Hall School in Leicester has embraced this challenge and taken environmental education to its heart. It participates in the national Eco-Schools programme and has achieved the distinction of Green Flag status three years in a row. With a particular focus on developing its outdoor school grounds, Nether Hall was awarded the Eco-Schools – Schools Ground Topic Award 2022 (Keep Britain Tidy, 2022).

Setting out on an eco-journey

Nether Hall School in the north-east of Leicester has over 130 pupils on roll aged 4 to 19 who have a range of special educational needs. The school's eco-journey began in 2018, when it sought permission to create an outdoor learning space on land adjacent to the school. Since then, it has planted more than 5,000 trees and students have been taught how trees capture carbon through a very sensory method – via conversation about gases and bubbles and using sponges and playdough. The students understand that trees benefit the environment, even if they don't fully understand the implications for climate change.

Many of the projects students undertake are driven by Eco-Schools topics. For example, in relation to the topic of water, students learned how sewage is made and why we should be careful what we flush as it can harm sea life. When focusing on the topic of biodiversity, students developed animal homes and habits. Active programmes like these create a sense of citizenship, with students feeling they are making a positive difference to the world around them.

With the support of the local authority and Earthwatch (an environmental charity that connects people with the natural world), Nether Hall was a recipient of one of Commonwealth Games' Tiny Forests, funded by Severn Trent (Severn Trent, 2021). Students, parents, and the wider community were responsible for planting the forest and the school continues to monitor and maintain it via curriculum subjects. The most able students measure the tree height and trunk circumference and understand that the taller and bigger the trees, the more carbon they capture – even if they are not sure what the problem with carbon is.



Photo: Leicester City Council

Teachers' lack of knowledge and confidence to deliver climate change and sustainability education has been recognised as a challenge across schools. Through the Tiny Forests programme, all staff received training on how to monitor and frame the project around climate change. One follow-up to this was that Earthwatch, in conjunction with Nether Hall School staff, developed and refined SEND-specific curriculum-linked activities. Likewise, staff received training from Learning through Landscapes (a UK-based charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children) about how to best use the school's outdoor space to teach all aspects of the curriculum, including climate issues. Finally, Leicester City Council became the first local authority to develop carbon literacy for school staff and governors, which some staff have accessed (Leicester City Council, 2022).

Climate anxiety

The number of students with climate anxiety (distress related to the climate and ecological crises) continues to rise (Hickman et al., 2021) and a major challenge for education is to reassure children and young people that we can tackle climate change and it can be done in the limited time we have left to avert further climate chaos. Students with special needs may not always be able to articulate their anxiety, which is often seen through changes in behaviour. For example, staff at Nether Hall were aware that many students were affected by Covid lockdowns even though they did not fully grasp the narrative. Similarly, they sense that students are aware of the climate change crisis because they pick up on family and friends' worries and concerns.

Through the projects and programmes at Nether Hall, our children and young people experience a sense of agency. By interacting with the outdoors on a regular basis we have seen students, particularly those with profound and multiple learning disabilities, get a pure sense of exploration which is less apparent in the classroom.

Leadership and funding

The DfE's strategy states that all schools are expected to have a nominated sustainability leader. At Nether Hall, sustainability and climate change is overseen by the middle leadership role of 'Exploring and understanding the wider world'. Increasingly in schools, we are seeing a team of staff leading on sustainability that includes middle leaders, senior leaders (from teaching and business), and site support staff, ensuring longevity and improved staff buy-in to related projects.

A challenge nearly all schools face is funding. Nether Hall has almost completely transformed its outdoor learning through grants and donations. Initially, this funding was sought locally through businesses, but this has now been expanded to national grant makers and foundations. However, fundraising takes time and effort to achieve, which not all schools have the capacity to undertake.

One positive of the strategy is that the DfE has recently announced £15 million of funding to enable schools to improve outdoor learning facilities, although this funding is for targeted areas and predetermined criteria (Department for Education, 2023a).

Measuring success and transferring learning

So, how is success measured? For students and staff at Nether Hall, it is about enjoyment and longevity. While some projects have not been as successful as others – composting, for example, did not become embedded for logistical reasons – many other projects are flourishing, including:

- reducing plastic use in school
- reminders about only flushing the 'three Ps' (pee, poo and toilet paper)
- regular litter picking

Over the five years of Nether Hall's eco-journey, there has been a real shift in the way that students use the outdoor spaces and understand their role in climate change.

Reflecting on all the activities that have taken place – could they be delivered in mainstream schools? Absolutely! There are often different challenges in finding time and capacity, but certainly the projects that have taken place at Nether Hall could be repeated

elsewhere. For example, Tiny Forests are now in over 20 schools in Leicester, the majority in mainstream primary and secondary. It is worth noting that not all schools have access to such great outdoor spaces, however through the National Education Nature Park there are opportunities for all schools to investigate and enhance biodiversity (Department for Education, 2023b).

By December 2023, the DfE will have announced the winning providers for the Climate Action Plans and National Climate Hubs, which will support all education settings in England with climate action (Department for Education, 2023c). This will provide support to those schools who have not already started on their sustainability journey as well as those much further along, like Nether Hall School. ➔



Photo: Nether Hall School

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