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## A model for success!

Felicity Robinson, LTL consultant and accredited school grounds professional, talks about how design-modelling and problem-solving workshops successfully engaged children at **Barons Court Primary School** in Essex

'The project brief was to engage children and staff in designing their grounds following the school's re-build and refurbishment. In practice, this also included helping the head negotiate with the contractors – support she appreciated, as she felt the school needed an ally who understood the school's needs and could speak the same language as the contractors.'

### Assessing the site

'The first stage of the process of change was to look at what the site currently offered and talk through how the school wanted to use the site. Children, staff and the whole school community had opportunities to engage with the site assessment, needs analysis, planning and design process.'

During the first workshop, supported by a delivery officer from Learning through Landscapes and led by the "Lion Team" of Yr2 children, we observed the site in use and recorded features that worked well, and those that did not. The children chose a toy mascot, named "Sea Bear" who joined them on all the visits and workshops. Sea bear helped the younger children explore ideas through his persona – for example, we might say "Where would Sea Bear go if he was sad and wanted to be in a calm comfortable place? What would this place be like? What would Sea Bear see and do here? etc" .

'For inspiration, staff and children visited places such as a natural play park and allotments, discussed ideas from photos and produced a collage of a range of possibilities.'

'Teaching and non-teaching staff also thought in great detail about how they wanted to use the whole site for learning outdoors and were inspired by additional ideas that I brought along to the meetings. Throughout the process key issues and needs were summarised in an evolving "photo story", which also formed a record of the whole project. Sea Bear featured in many photos!'

### Developing a design brief

'The next step was to synthesise all the information that been gathered into a design brief, and then to develop more design details with the Lion Team. I collated all the disparate ideas into a cohesive long-term plan for the whole site, and helped set up experimental layouts so everyone could get a feel for how the space could work, as well as understand some of the design constraints.'

'For the children this resulted in memorable active learning which they were able to record when Creative Partnerships undertook their evaluation. For example, comments from the children included: "We could not put the pond here because there is no sunlight" (Yr3).

'As the school expands from an infant school to a primary school we also had to consider how older children could use the site – even though at this stage there were none on the school role. There was insufficient space for a full ball games pitch, but a scaled-down version has been included, with a view to the school negotiating a ball court on an adjacent site in due course.'

### Design modelling and problem solving

'A highlight of the project was using one of the school's regular "Beach Days" for a design-modelling and problem-solving workshop. Using sand and found objects at their local beach, the children were encouraged to think through some design issues in 3D, assess their solutions and make changes to improve their designs. The staff were intrigued by this approach, and have subsequently used this method with the children to involve them in decision making on other issues. Of course, not every school has access to a sandy beach – but even a large sand pit or a few bags of builders' sand in the corner of a field have been successful alternatives in other schools.'

'To bring the IT curriculum into the project too, I worked with the children and staff to produce stop-motion videos of the Beach Day design workshop. These were proudly shown by the "film directors" to parents and visitors at a school community day.'

'Models, but at real scale this time, were also used to develop the details for the adventure play zone. I led a workshop with the children to work out how large the space needed to be – numeracy for real! Then the children constructed full-scale models of the sort



Above and left: The school regularly visits their local beach – and on one of these visits the children used the sand and objects they found lying around to build models of their dream grounds before assessing and improving their designs



**'The hands-on approach to construction has been brilliant'**

Left: The children were involved not just with the design of their climbing area but also the construction work (far left)

of equipment that could be built between existing trees. The children's models were the starting point for a range of balance and upper body challenges. The children responded brilliantly: "Felicity always wants to know what we think, she knows a lot but still needs our ideas". The tight site was a key restriction, but creative thinking and use of the existing trees led to a good conclusion.'

### Hands-on building

'At the start of this project neither the staff nor parents had envisaged that the children would be able to get so hands on with construction. However, the adventure zone – supplied by Touchwood – was constructed by them with input from the children over several days of workshops. As they saw the build grow over the week, parents were amazed to hear that their children had been using tools and helping with the work and were delighted with the process as well as the outcome. The deputy headteacher said: "The hands-on approach to construction has been brilliant. The children were heads down engaged in what they were doing, and evidently enjoying it too."

'The children were developing skills, working safely and cooperatively, and using real tools such as drills and saws: "I can see sweat running down my nose!" said one boy from Yr2 working on the bark peeling.

'The children had to demonstrate perseverance and were satisfied by hard work and the reward of seeing the structure growing in front of their eyes each day. Taking part in the build like this develops a strong degree of ownership – the children were overheard everyday telling their parents and siblings all about the particular elements of the structures that they worked on.'

### Funding

'The engagement process of the project was funded through Creative Partnerships, and the school had a small capital budget (that reduced regularly as the refurbishment over ran!) Some elements of the scheme were completed within the "making good" and landscape works associated with the refurbishment project. Gifts in kind, including parental help (for example, with the Piazza meeting place), were also a feature of the project which was a great example of a school community helping to deliver a practical outcome. Having a local handy person to cost and deliver smaller projects also proved to be a cost effective way for this overall plan to be delivered in small bites when budget becomes available.'

### Outcomes and sustainability

'These far exceeded expectations. After the new area had been in use for several months, children, staff and parents made many positive evaluations: "The climbing area is very popular. As we predicted the monkey bars are the most popular feature, although the younger children really like the rope walk." One child said: "the first time I couldn't do the monkey bars. Now I can make it to the end. I must have got longer and stronger".

'The children have especially enjoyed the fact that they helped plan it and build it. One boy told me: "It really makes a difference because you know what you built. You've taken part in it. You've done all the hard work and now we can enjoy it. It's like making a cup of tea, you go to all the hard work of making it and then you can sit back and relax".

'The site continues to develop with the children still key to decision making and construction. Sustainability comes through this continued engagement, as well as careful choices and forethought. For example, the school insisted that oak treads from a redundant staircase were stored until a use was found for them. I suggested they could be carved and used to define the Piazza space, and a parent designed and installed the seating. There are still some stored resources that the school plans to use in the grounds at a future date.

'Major factors in the success of this project included a proactive team of teaching and support staff, a strong outdoor learning ethos and the support I was able to offer to the senior management team. These comments from the head and deputy headteacher sum up the experience for the school:

"Before I would have gone straight to a catalogue and bought monkey bars, shed, swings, or whatever, but now I realise not only that all of that can be made using recycled material but – more importantly – that the children can be involved, learn, express themselves and get a great sense of achievement."

"The children feel listened to, encouraged and supported, and they were fully engaged and committed when working on the outside design. There were given the opportunity to really try and experiment with new concepts and materials."

'The last word, however, must come from one of the children: "Its going to be here for ever, and we made it!"'

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