

Case Study 1: Snowdrops Bloom at Springbank Nursery – A Creative Community

Springbank Nursery, Paisley, Renfrewshire

This case study explains how a creative approach to management and partnerships involving staff, parents and the community has fostered and encouraged learning and development opportunities.

From the moment a child is born it has rights. It is the role of the early years educator to assist each child to know how to benefit from these rights as well as to help him or her to come to terms with what is expected of them by society. We have to develop within the child a 'thirst for learning' which will encourage the young learner to overcome the fear of the unknown and make the learning process an exciting challenge.

Cecilia Kerr, Headteacher

Springbank Nursery School is a purpose-built nursery for 3–5-year-old children and serves the Shortroods district of Paisley. This is a Priority 1 area in terms of social and economic development and presents a number of significant challenges to the organisation and delivery of education and related services.

The ethic, which underpins the work of the school, is driven by a determination to identify and exploit the individual strengths of all the school community to the full with a view to delegating real responsibility for action. Several of the staff have been in post for some time but all are committed to embracing change to better meet the needs of pupils. This willingness to adapt and more fully meet the needs of the community that they serve has seen some exciting developments at the nursery – not least of which has been the opening of a wing to support children with very specific learning and behavioural difficulties. The addition of facilities including a safe play area, an environmental and sensory garden and a parents' room also provides indicators of an establishment geared to changing priorities and directions in early years education.

We recognise that the needs of the child cannot be isolated from those of the family and that the child is part of the community in which it is placed. To fully support the child we must be part of addressing the needs of the family and in supporting the community in improving the environment surrounding its children. In order to do these things we must be prepared to review and evaluate the way in which we deliver our services. We must learn from this evaluation and constantly adapt and change to suit the perceived needs of the child, the family and the community.

Cecilia Kerr

The nursery bases its work on the principles of the Italian pre-school movement epitomised by the Italian 'Reggio Emilia' approach. This approach centres on the development of a child's intellect, confidence and self-esteem through creative approaches to arts and exploration of the environment. When taken together with the recently issued national guidance on the pre-5 curriculum the aim is to provide a stimulating educational experience for its pupils. The nursery is colourfully decorated with two- and three-dimensional artwork of both individual and group varieties. Colours are changed in the nursery to coincide with the seasons and the skilful use of mirrors at child height further enhances display as well as offering children important opportunities to view themselves making movement or dressing up for role play. Great care has been taken to value the efforts of children not only in display but also oral feedback and in encouraging 'telling' in activities such as 'circle time'.

Staff ensure that the opportunities for learning offered to children are well planned, interesting, inviting and achievable for the individual child. This requires an elaborated curriculum containing smaller achievable steps for some children whilst building in greater challenge and more open-ended tasks particularly for others. The overall approach of having a keyworker with responsibility for every four pupils maintains attention to individual development across the nursery. It is in the attention to individual needs and the quest for effective and more interesting ways of providing learning activities using a variety of methods and resources that a number of creative approaches and projects have come into being. These initiatives themselves demonstrate a range of creative strategies and thinking at every level of the community of the nursery from children to the involvement of parents and friends.

Planning and recording

A fundamental strength of the management of the nursery is the priority given to engaging staff in effective long- and short-term planning. Staff have twice-weekly planning times when they can share and evaluate information on individual children and group/individual activities including those that allow for the integration of special needs children some of whom have profound learning disabilities. This facility to consider the development, continuity and progression of broad learning experiences and the planning of programmes makes the development of pupils' skills and experiences in areas such as collaboration, choosing and sharing, discussing and problem solving easier to establish and maintain.

The assembly of individual pupil profile folders containing staff comment on the development of each child, photographic records, assessment records and examples of work allow for the build up of a comprehensive overview of the progress of each child, which is useful in both current and future educational programme planning. Assessment records have sections that allow the recording of attainment in interpersonal skills such as cooperation and sharing as well as comment sections on more specific areas such as attitudes to learning, capacity to make choices, planning and taking decisions.

All of these are areas that contribute to a nursery ethos encouraging creative abilities and approaches. It is also important for the overall planning process in the school since the views of even these very young children are actively sought in the evaluation of provided activities and experiences.

Partnership

The management style of the headteacher encourages the delegation of responsibility to staff at all levels who in their turn seek to encourage and develop individual action and thinking on the part of pupils. This strategy capitalises on the clear talent and skills of individual staff members within the team and has seen the development of specialisms in areas such as the arts or planning. The strengths of individuals are brought into play across the work of the nursery and individual members of staff develop and deliver significant elements of the nursery service and facilities.

I really missed the headteacher when she was seconded out of the school. Suddenly we were put into a way of working where we were told what to do and not treated as professional partners.

Member of staff

In this strategy the key features of a creative approach are apparent – staff identify and share problems and issues, research possible solutions and share findings, evaluate possible solutions and plan collaboratively towards the implementation of an agreed course of action. These processes have been further enhanced by an imaginative approach to managing the school development budget, which has allowed for finance to be made available for individual members of staff to be commissioned to take on special development tasks.

We must create an atmosphere where both adults and children feel welcome and valued and where all can ask questions freely.

Senior Nursery Nurse

These principles have been extended into the community of the nursery with the active involvement of parents as genuine partners in the running and development of the work of the nursery. The school has a policy, agreed with parents, which outlines the responsibilities of the nursery in relation to the education and development of their child and the nursery responsibilities to the wider community served by the school. However the nursery has taken things further with the establishment in 1996 of a Parent and Staff Association (PSA). This body comprises representatives of staff, parents and the wider community and aims to promote:

- the understanding of the importance of quality interaction between parents and their children
- cooperation between parents and nursery staff in everything pertaining to the wellbeing of the children
- opportunities for the study and discussion of all matters relating to the education and welfare of the children and to take appropriate action where desirable

- recognising the restraints on all parties and the responsibilities of all
- links through social activities to enhance the roles of all working with young children
- communication and development links with members of our community in order to develop a service to suit their needs.

Far from being a talking shop the PSA set itself a tough agenda of action including surveying the local community for action priorities and setting up working parties to deliver on agreed tasks. One major initiative involving the establishment of a safe play area for the community could only be made a reality with the injection of substantial funding with the only likely source being the National Lottery. This involved the PSA establishing itself as a limited company and saw even greater community involvement with the inclusion of local professional groups including managers of some public services, lawyers from the local law centre, accountants, transport and other professionals and church representatives. Parents and teachers realised the need to get to grips with a wider range of skills and concepts and courses were arranged with local college and professionals on aspects such as company law, accountancy and employment law. Other topics included running meetings and facilitation skills.

It was great to get an insight into what the legal requirements were – I never realised how much protection was built into the system when it came to getting things done.

Member of PSA

In the emerging successful lottery application and project action creative skills, such as problem identification, collaboration, problem solving, action planning and implementation, came into play. The confidence and self-esteem of both organisers and the community developed and from this experience, other initiatives and actions have flowed, and others are planned. The PSA has now evolved a sub-group, the Action Advisory Group, which involves the local councillor, health visitor and other key personnel. The function of this group is to follow through on particular action points and take forward the identification of other issues for the larger group to consider. The PSA and its work exemplify a practical approach to action and involvement in the community – citizenship in action.

People have gained new skills drawing strength from the experience including the establishment of an *ad hoc* parents' self-help group that convenes to discuss and share problems all parents have at the different development stages of their children's development. This group is convened by a link parent who involves professionals and others depending on the nature of the issues under discussion. Other self-help groups focused on the needs of children with special educational needs and their families have also been established.

The PSA and related initiatives whilst exemplifying creativity at work within the community of the nursery also gives us some clues as to the infrastructure,

which helps support and develop a climate of creative thinking and action in a school.

Where resources have not been readily available we have worked creatively to find ways of getting them – this has included applying for Lottery funding and utilising a range of other funding channels.

Cecilia Kerr

Safe play area – ‘Working for a Brighter Future’

Whilst working with a number of community groups and surveying the views of the local population the PSA identified the need for a safe play area for the children in Shortroods as its first priority. It was agreed that not only would such an area provide a safe area for children to use but would also provide a context for work on parenting skills with young parents. Opportunities for developing and fostering relationships between child and parent and opportunities to develop children’s interpersonal skills through play formed the basis for such work. Similar proposed developments in the past had failed for a variety of reasons, not least because of funding difficulties and the coordination of interested individuals and groups. The importance of succeeding where others had failed and working with the community to empower it and effect a positive change and develop attitudes of self-belief and self-value became the driving force for the PSA. There was a realisation that if the parents and community wanted to improve the quality of their children’s lives they would need to become actively involved in the process.

The objectives set by the PSA were to:

- help identify the resources to improve the quality of life for the community
- support economic growth and prosperity by introducing young people and parents into courses, training and learning opportunities while arranging childcare for them
- work with local groups to promote empowerment and involvement in education
- try to involve all sectors of society to be visibly, positively represented as well as challenge prejudice and injustice
- encourage children and adults with special needs to be integrated and supported within our organisation
- try to develop an understanding of the roots of discrimination felt by members of the community and to challenge it and help and empower individuals to challenge it in themselves and others for the good of all.

In order to achieve the setting up of the safe play area the PSA converted itself to limited company status, involved members and others in training and action initiatives and achieved substantial National Lottery (£45,000) and Environmental Trust (£8000) funding to take forward their initiative. The local authority services in planning, architecture and technical services were employed by the PSA and legal and political help was obtained to negotiate matters such as the lease of land.

The resulting play area is a significant enhancement of the school grounds and embracing the latest in outdoor play technology. The construction encourages creative play activity by including safe landing areas and challenging play and problem-solving configurations such as a tunnel space, rope and solid construction elements, colour discriminated areas and natural aspects such as wind soundpipes.

The facility is managed by the nursery but it is open to the community for supervised play outwith normal hours with the facility being available for booking by associated groups and schools. The PSA employ two part-time play leaders who work with parents and children and also make home visits to encourage greater use of the facility and to help with parent's questions on play activities. The play leaders also monitor the use made of the facility compiling graphs and other data related not only to the use of the facility but also the effectiveness of the range of activities that they offer.

The PSA objectives outlined above have been achieved and indeed surpassed. Further plans are now in the pipeline to re-model more of the grounds around the nursery to provide more organised play space. This will include fixed games such as crazy golf and ground painted games, to encourage children of all ages in creative play activity and to develop their thinking skills including prediction, testing and decision-taking.

I think it is wonderful what we have achieved in establishing this safe play area. We desperately needed this as a community and I for one am proud that we did it.

Parent

Parents/community room

The nursery staff and the PSA noted that if they were to develop a genuine working partnership with parents an early step had to be the demonstration of commitment. Around 80 per cent of households in the area served by the nursery are with lone parents. Whilst facilities do exist elsewhere in the community for meetings there was a requirement to have meeting and social facilities for nursery parents and other community groups, focused on the needs of young parents, which went beyond simple waiting areas. In order to achieve this parents were involved in the design and planning of the conversion of a space within the nursery. This provides a comfortable, practical area that can be used for meetings as well as having facilities such as tea-making to make waiting and meeting more convivial. In addition the room provides support resources for parents and acts as a point for information exchange. The room is also used for training meetings and a feature under development is parent participation with in-house training.

Further consolidation of the partnership and support for parents has been demonstrated through the organisation of a breakfast club by nursery staff to help parents in employment to meet working hours commitments. Plans are also being made to develop after-session care for children to enhance the

services already offered by Springbank and the nearby community partnership nursery.

Wildlife sensory garden

In 1996 plans were made to capitalise on available funding and expertise within the regeneration programme called The Cart River Valley Project. Part of the ethos of the work of the nursery involves encouraging the children to value and explore the natural environment. Unfortunately bland grassed areas, flatted housing and school playgrounds surround the school. There was a desire to develop the area adjacent to the school to establish a garden that would attract wildlife and allow the children to experience plant lifecycles and be involved in the planting and growing processes. Expert advice was sought from the local Cart River ranger service and funding obtained through the Sustainable Communities Initiative. Children were involved in the design process and produced some excellent suggestions including the need for raised flowerbeds to meet the needs of wheelchair users. The children helped with plant selections and with the planting process itself. The garden is maintained by staff and volunteers from the community and has proved to be a welcome enrichment of the school's provision of high quality educational experiences.

An association with the Lochwinnoch Bird Sanctuary ranger service has further enhanced awareness work and children are now exposed to a term of weekly visits to the reserve using the transport available for taking special needs pupils to and from home. These visits have added new experiences for the children and have led to bird-related developments in the sensory garden at Springbank.

Snowdrop wing

Since opening in 1976 the nursery has catered for children with a range of special needs and staff and parents have worked within a policy of total inclusion. Such was their success that in 1999 a new wing was established in the nursery – the Snowdrop wing. The wing caters for children with a range of particular needs arising from autistic spectrum, language and communication disorders. These pupils require a higher level of individual support than other special needs pupils in a mainstream nursery and they are housed in two specially resourced rooms – the Sunbeam Room and Butterfly Room. Planning for and meeting the needs of these pupils is demanding but the staff who work with the children are committed to inclusion where possible. The children are integrated according to the appropriateness of activities both for themselves as individuals and for the needs of other pupils. Parents of the children benefit from involvement in self-help groups run by the nursery staff and parents.

Staff in the Snowdrop wing are very much part of the nursery staff team making contributions to the overall strategy and working of the nursery and assisting in facilitating planning time for staff across the school. Staff have developed and maintained imaginative approaches to their work and their

creative professionalism has seen some become prime movers in major projects including the initiative to develop a safe play area. It is also worth noting that it was a parent who suggested the use of the term 'wing' to describe the facilities provided for special needs (Snowdrop Wing) and the main facility (Bluebell Wing). Such was the determination of all involved to avoid any discrimination between the users of the nursery's services.

When a child leaves Springbank we want them to move on with confidence and be ready to meet the challenges ahead, but also to be able to show an awareness and sensitivity to the needs of others.

Cecilia Kerr

Springbank Nursery School has received awards and recognition of its work. However, this recognition is strengthened by an approach that encourages creativity and responsibility for action in all the partners involved in the service it provides – children, staff, parents, volunteers and the community at large. People and their efforts are valued and the significance of their efforts is recognised. The nursery capitalises on the intuitive creativity of the pupils, its talented staff and other adults but it has also built in management and organisational structures to achieve implementation of goals and to sustain development into the future.

This case study has focused on several management and partnership approaches involving staff, parents and community partners. However, in the wider life and work of the nursery a number of outstanding features contribute to such a high level of creative action in this learning community.

Creativity in learning

- All pupils have planned opportunities to develop and apply their creativity abilities and this is evident particularly in play and arts activities.
- Pupils are given opportunities to develop and consolidate their creativity in school outside normal lesson times in contexts that include play area work and in developed play/experience with parents.
- Pupils are prepared to take the initiative in applying creativity to relevant tasks such as planning garden and play areas and at a daily level in activities such as arts, structured play and discovery.
- Pupils are encouraged by sensitive staff intervention to persevere with challenging tasks.

Teaching for creativity

- A climate of enthusiasm and pleasure in learning is fostered and valued by both staff and parents.
- Pupils are confident and secure through classroom management arrangements that have been carefully planned to ensure focus and choice in the learning activities on offer.
- Class displays are very effective and clearly value the efforts of pupils.

- The impact of building design and space, planning and organisation of outdoor space has been carefully considered and strategies modified to suit – particularly with a view to the integration of children with special educational needs.
- Pupils, parents and staff receive regular and coordinated feedback through regular face-to-face contacts, planning meetings and documented progress files.
- Effective links with the wider community involving genuine partnership developments and exchange of ideas and perspectives are very evident not only in large-scale projects but also in the day-to-day work of the school.
- Schemes of work and programmes of study take account the skills associated with creativity, although the school intends to work further on this.
- Staff are aware of an increasing number of pupils displaying ‘creative’ attitudes, skills and concepts although this is not monitored in a formal way.

Managing for creativity

- The overall approach of the school includes aims and values in respect of creativity.
- All staff know and support the principles that the school operates particularly in respect to developing individual skills and initiative with a high regard for delegated responsibility for action.
- The headteacher and the PSA are explicit in their support for this dimension of the school’s policy.
- Programmes of work and nursery initiatives develop creativity and encourage opportunities to develop creative skills and experiences.
- Creative activity is featured in development planning with commitments to both resources and staff development opportunities.
- Funding is sought and allocated to implement creativity developments.
- Systems are in place for monitoring the implementation of the creativity elements of the development plan; evaluating the effectiveness of strategies that are being employed; reviewing policies and approaches, programmes of study, the implementation of initiatives and schemes of work.

Sustaining creativity in learning and teaching

- Staff provide effective models of teaching and activity management and are involved in strategies for disseminating good practice.
- Staff and other partners have the explicit support of the headteacher.
- An adequate amount of time is made available to staff to develop the creative aspects of learning experiences and time for such is provided by staff to the pupils, parents and volunteer helpers.
- Staff provide an agreed base of opportunity for pupils and are allowed to develop their own confidence for creativity activities.
- Support is available to those who are building their skills and knowledge.

- Staff *believe* that the development of creativity is a key aspect of the curriculum and wider work of the nursery and incorporate recommended approaches into their teaching and partnership work with parents and other community partners.