

Our South Downs Case study

Moulsecomb Primary School, Brighton

Developing the potential of the school site and local area

Moulsecomb Primary School is on the outskirts of Brighton and the fringes of the South Downs National Park. As many as 8 out of 10 children have special educational needs with 25 per cent receiving outside agency involvement. In an area of high deprivation the school is an oasis for learning and play. Despite its location many children at the school have not visited the beach by the time they reach year one, and many of the children's families have several generations of unemployment and low-paid jobs. Many children come to the school with limited experience of the world around them, so it is particularly important that they benefit from a wider range of experiences at school.

When the headteacher, Charles Davies, arrived at the school 11 years ago, the site was a typical grey and green desert surrounded by chain-link fencing. He talks about how the children 'bounced against' the fencing as they had little to do in such a sterile environment.

Since then the school has made, and continues to make, changes to the grounds to provide the children with a stimulating and creative environment for both learning and play. The school is located alongside a busy road, and this has been one of the aspects the school has worked to mitigate against, using banking and hedge planting adjacent to the boundary. Another early change to the site was the installation of a MUGA (Multi Use Games Area) towards the top of the field, freeing up space in the remainder of the grounds and allowing for developments around the boundary of the main field.

Links with the past

The main open space in the grounds has a mature willow dome. Now 10 years old, it is not only a play space itself but also provides a source of willow cuttings that have been used to create other features around the site, as well as being used for craft work. Alongside the northern boundary a large bank has been developed, creating a barrier to the road. The road side this has been planted with daffodil bulbs and wildflowers, while the side towards the field is used by the children to roll down. A walk along the top of the banks leads to steps which, in turn, lead down to the main playing field. Here a series of historical buildings have been built, including a Round House at one end and a Neolithic Hut at the other, each used both for lessons and for play.

The houses are examples of how the school has made links to local expertise. In 2005 the school started a project with the

The Round House (below) and the Neolithic Hut (bottom)



From top left (clockwise): The new pond, slides between playgrounds, performance space and chillout area



East Sussex Archaeology and Museum Partnership. The children were actively involved in creating the buildings – helping to weave the timber structures and render the walls – and they continue to help maintain them and learn about the structures.

Also along the boundary is a geology trail. Rocks from around the country have been brought to the school to set into the grounds. A map indicating where each of the rocks originates from can be found inside the school. Further along the boundary is a totem pole – designed by the children to reflect the school. Next to this is the school’s Christmas tree nursery where they grow and harvest their own tree each year. A circle of standing stones has been created in one corner of the grounds – 10 stones, eight of which create a circle with a diameter of 10 metres. The stones are also marked with the points of a compass and are used in a variety of lessons.

Connecting with nature

The school has several ponds, the newest of which is just a couple of years old. The children requested a pond that they could sit beside.

Further along the boundary path is the school orchard which reflects the historical use of the land and is planted with a number of traditional varieties of apple and pear. Move through this area and you will also find a beetle habitat and long grass in which the children love to play in the summer months.

Adjacent to the school MUGA is a willow labyrinth constructed using cuttings from the original willow dome. The pathway is 100m long and leads towards a carved stone, one of many that have been beautifully crafted on the site.

The path then leads down through a small copse of native trees and shrubs, past a storytelling area that also becomes a social space for the children.

The final feature around the playing field is an air raid shelter and a ‘dig for victory’ growing area. Year 4 children study World War II as part of their curriculum and have undertaken a series of activities related to this period in

history. Supporting their creative curriculum one such activity involved children taking part in a mock evacuation. They took the train from their local station to the next station along to be greeted by the local vicar who was in charge of allocating their new families – some of which were nicer than others!

Making the most of the space

Every corner of the grounds is being used in some way. Areas that could have been redundant have become quiet seating areas and a new ‘World Garden’ is currently being developed in one such space.

Moving into the main playground area the developments continue. There are two distinctive spaces within this area. At one stage the link between the two playgrounds was a point of congestion so a second link between the two spaces was made using a tunnel – thus solving the problem with a fun solution.

This area of the grounds was where changes were initiated when the head joined the school. With concerns from staff that any changes might be vandalised, the first development consisted only of a trim trail. When this proved to be a success more changes followed. The children were consulted about what they wanted to be able to do in their grounds; answers included sliding through a jungle, performing and climbing. As a result a slide has been created that leads from the playground down to the level of the school, running through bushes on its way. On the playground there is a performance area, a climbing tower and a climbing wall with a mural behind.

The early years children have a well-developed space directly outside their classrooms where they enjoy riding bikes and trikes and playing in the sand pit. They are also growing a range of fruit and vegetables in their planters. At the top of a bank is a further area for them to play in. With a path running through a lawn with trees, it is a quiet informal space.

The final outdoor space is an internal courtyard. Within this there is a mature wildlife pond, a fish pond, growing beds and chickens – which supply eggs for the school breakfasts.

Each year the school runs a Heritage and Environment Festival during which they invite children from other local primary schools to join them in workshops using the resources in their school grounds. Activities have included archaeological digs, storytelling, making bird feeders and house-building skills. In addition, the school runs teacher workshops, working with local experts such as the Sussex Wildlife Trust and the East Sussex Archaeology and Museum Partnership, helping other schools develop their own use of the outdoor environment.

The school will continue to develop its grounds and the work within it, so there is something new for each group of children as they move through the school.

Future landscapes

The work in the school does not stop at the boundary – they often use the local environment to enhance the experiences of the children at the school, whether working with the

Sussex Wildlife Trust on their Henfield site, heading into Brighton to see how the city has developed or visiting the local lifeboat centre. Whether inside the school grounds or using the environment beyond, the focus is often on how people have developed their landscapes in different ways and how their children can continue to do this today.

In 2008 the school was given an award for their learning outside the classroom from the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom.

Find out more

- Moulsecoomb Primary School website
www.moulsecoomb.brighton-hove.sch.uk/index.htm
- East Sussex Archaeology and Museum Partnership (ESAMP)
www.esamp.com
- The special qualities of the South Downs National Park
www.southdowns.gov.uk

The school works with a whole site plan (below)

