Growth through growing

Students with special educational needs

Dr Mark Rickinson
Introduction

The Children, Schools and Families Select Committee’s 2010 report into Transforming Education Outside the Classroom makes clear that students with special educational needs (SEN) “still have particularly poor access to learning outside the classroom”.¹ This is despite widespread recognition that these students are often the ones who have the most to gain from “frequent opportunities to get out into the school grounds or local community”.²

With this in mind, this publication highlights ways in which outdoor growing activities are being used to support the learning of SEN students. It uses case-study examples and practitioner testimony from a range of school and beyond school settings to illustrate how students can:

- enjoy new experiences and relationships (page 4)
- develop a sense of responsibility and pride (page 8)
- enhance their learning and achievement (page 12)
- be supported by practitioners when working outdoors (page 16).

² http://www.lotc.org.uk/getmedia/c858d3dd-2cdc-4268-b15b-e84b83f15eff/SEN-45-LOTC.aspx

¹ http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchilsch/418/418.pdf

Growth through growing – SEN students
New experiences and relationships

SENSORY ENCOUNTERS, INFORMAL ATMOSPHERES AND OPEN SPACES

Getting SEN students involved with growing plants and looking after animals opens them up to a host of new environments, experiences and relationships.

**Sensory experiences**  A theme that is stressed time and time again by educators working in outdoor environments is the incredible potential they give for sensory stimulus. Thinking creatively about how to maximise this sensory potential is key to working with SEN students, particularly those with sensory impairments. This is well illustrated by recent work with students from Sheringham Woodfields School (Case Study 1). It is also reflected in the experiences of staff at Hadrian School (for 2-11 year olds with severe and profound and multiple learning difficulties) who have come to recognise that “experiencing the sounds, smells and touch of the plants is just as important as doing things in the gardens”.

**Informal relationships**  Working outdoors also provides opportunities for new types of conversations and relationships with staff and peers. Helen O’Sullivan,
Sheringham Woodfields School caters for students (2–19 years) with severe or complex learning disabilities/difficulties. As part of the key stage 4 curriculum, the school has developed close links with Holt Hall Field Studies Centre which is a short drive from the school. At present all 14–19 year-old students spend half a day/week at Holt Hall for at least half a term and in some cases for a full school year. Sheringham Woodfields students have been involved in environmental work such as constructing a new bird hide at the centre, and creative projects such as making musical instruments from natural objects. The young people’s responses to the musical instruments work have been particularly positive. Sue Roberts, Head of Sixth Form, puts this down to the way that Holt Hall staff...nd everything more sensory-based by having more things to hold and touch when making the instruments – some students made very large instruments that came up to their knees while others used very knotty wood so that it was interesting to touch and feel.

Building on this work, there are now plans to develop a multi-sensory trail at Holt Hall. The vision is to create an accessible walkway with stations that embrace each of the five Every Child Matters themes.
Responsibility and pride

**DOING IMPORTANT TASKS WITH REAL RESULTS**

Working outdoors provides SEN students with a whole range of ways to get involved with practical activities that involve real responsibility and valuable outcomes. This is particularly significant for young people who are often in dependent situations relative to others and can easily be overlooked when it comes to positions of responsibility.

**Taking responsibility** Amanda Love (Horticulture technician, Worle Community School) runs a lunchtime farm club that is popular with younger SEN students who “haven’t found their niche socially”. In her experience, the club “helps to give these students a sense of responsibility because if they’re picking up and caring for animals then they need to know how to do it properly and this makes them feel good about themselves”. Similarly, Jennie Rollings (Horticulture teacher, Oak Grove College) described how well some of her “challenging boys” responded to “being given the responsibility of doing heavy work in the school grounds such as helping to install a new swing for wheelchair users”.>
Another key attribute of growing-related activities is that they are about “manual work with a real purpose” (Anne Menzies, Senior Teacher, Hadrian School). As noted by the OFSTED report for Oathall Community College (see Case Study 2): “The activities [on the school farm] are not devised or simulated, but rather those necessary for the safekeeping of the plants and animals.” In other words, there are continual opportunities to carry out important tasks that yield clear and tangible results.

In her work with 14–19 year olds with complex needs, Sue Roberts (Head of Sixth Form, Sheringham Woodfields School) has found that “with planting, growing and woodland management, students can clearly see what they’ve produced so there’s an instant gratification”. Other practitioners tell a similar story: “There’s a sense of pride that they’ve done something and you can see it and it’s growing”; “Students take great pride in their work, self-esteem rises and they are proud to discuss their achievements with our many visitors”.

Oathall Community College in West Sussex is a specialist rural dimension school with a working mixed farm and gardens on site. The farm and gardens are used to enhance and enrich the curriculum in most subject areas for students from Oathall and several nearby schools. An important part of what the farm does is to work with learners with various needs including specific learning difficulties and speech, language and communication problems. Students get involved in a wide range of crop growing, animal rearing and maintenance/construction work. There are also farm open days, shows and community-based planting projects. Howard Wood, Oathall’s Rural Dimension Manager, emphasises the importance of giving students small responsibilities and achievable challenges: “The students get involved in showing visitors around our farm trail and mentoring younger visitors. They enjoy this responsibility and inevitably rise to the challenge.”

This is reflected in the experiences of Bradley, a boy who had experienced bullying as a result of his disability: “The farm gave me confidence because I realised that on the farm I could do things that many other pupils couldn’t do. Gradually other students began to respect me and the bullying stopped and I began to make lots of friends.”
Learning and achieving

CURRICULUM LINKS, VOCATIONAL LEARNING AND LIFE SKILLS

Working with SEN students in the outdoor classroom is central to their learning and achieving both in terms of curriculum connections as well as in terms of skills for living and working.

Curriculum learning For teachers like Anne Menzies (Senior Teacher, Hadrian School) growing activities “have massive links to other curriculum areas and can cover themes at so many levels e.g. simply naming something like soil versus talking about the germination process”. Action research by staff at The Chelsea Group of Children (for exceptional children aged 4–11) has shown how outdoor learning can support and extend indoor learning. In their words: “Children are able to see first hand, and in their own processing time, what they have only briefly experienced in the classroom on a much smaller scale.”¹¹ For students who “thrive on learning by doing”, small achievements in outdoor settings can have big impacts in terms of enhanced confidence and focus back in the classroom.
Vocational skills and interests  When it comes to learners in key stages 3 and 4, benefits in terms of work-related skills and interests are extremely important. Sue Roberts (Head of Sixth Form, Sheringham Woodfields School) highlights how outdoor growing has helped their students “to develop skills for working life such as using tools safely, planning and time management”. Working towards vocational/key skills qualifications, students get the chance to try their hand at various types of practical work and “find things they’re really good at” (Chris Wright, Project Manager, Holt Hall Field Studies Centre). This might mean discovering a hidden talent (“for carving wood or selling food”) or a new passion (“for growing things or looking after animals”) to develop further in the future.

Independence and life skills  For many SEN students, involvement in outdoor growing-related projects is also about developing capacities associated with acting and living independently (Case Study 3). What this means in practice varies greatly from student to student but some examples are “one boy has realised that, with support, he could work; others who will never work have learnt how to put on boots and overalls themselves” (Sue Roberts, Sheringham Woodfields School).

Growth through growing – SEN students  Butterfly Lodge is a mixed livestock farm and dairy unit near Colchester in Essex. Working with 14–20 year old students with a wide range of abilities and needs, it seeks to be “a unique training centre for animal husbandry and countryside management”. Students get involved in helping out with livestock, growing and harvesting vegetables, preparing and cooking food and maintaining farm buildings. There’s a strong emphasis on social integration and life skills development through individuated learning programmes and flexible approaches. Through carrying out meaningful practical tasks, students develop valuable new skills (cooking, communicating) along with an ability to set goals and boundaries. Working in groups with very different kinds of learners makes them more aware of themselves and others. To quote from the reflections of a 16-year-old female student who came to Butterfly Lodge after being placed in emergency housing: “I love working with the animals, and the staff at Butterfly Lodge are great – they understand what everyone is going through and if people go in a bad mood then they go home with a smile on their face. You get to meet new people and you get to work with animals and people you’ve never worked with before... like people with Autism and Down’s Syndrome.”

“One boy has realised that, with support, he could work; others have learned how to put on boots and overalls themselves.”


Case Study 3  Nurturing individual learners at Butterfly Lodge livestock/dairy farm, Essex

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While the simplicity of outdoor growing experiences can be appealing, the task of facilitating productive learning in outdoor settings is complex and sophisticated. Practitioners who have experience of doing this with SEN students highlight the following factors as helpful pointers.

**Adapting processes**

Thinking carefully about how activities, facilities and tools can be adapted and brought to life for learners with different kinds of capabilities is clearly essential. Support staff who work closely with individual students and know how to help them to access learning experiences can play a very important role here. So too can a clear focus on “what kinds of sensory experiences students would benefit from and then what kinds of environments are needed to meet those needs”.

**Working flexibly**

Being able to respond to changing situations is a critical skill for all educators, but particularly those working in outdoor settings with SEN students. As one practitioner explained, “every student I work with is very different so I might be playing football or making mud pies or looking on the computer for pictures of giant vegetables”. The weather is another changeable factor so having “some kind of facilities where you can work on very cold/wet days” is a big advantage.

**Making it different**

It is important not to overlook the distinctiveness of the outdoor classroom relative to the indoor classroom. This is about making outdoor work with SEN students different from school in terms of the tasks (“real projects that students can follow from start to end”), relationships (“relaxed working atmosphere where fun persists”), dress (“overalls, safety boots etc.”) and discipline (“rules couched in workplace language”).

“Thinking creatively about how to maximise sensory potential is key to working with SEN students”
Positive reinforcement
Phrases such as “constant positive reinforcement”, “continual praise” and “frequent opportunities for students to succeed” come up time and again in practitioners’ reflections. Strategies for making these things happen include “staff using language that is intensely positive” and “students being encouraged to talk about who had done what really well today and why”.

Connections with school
Developing outdoor growing projects in a vacuum is not helpful for learners, teachers or schools. In other words, it is important to recognise the many ways in which outdoor learning can support and extend indoor learning. This is about “taking advantage of weighing up rhubarb and comparing it with the weight the week before”, “collecting natural objects and using them back in the classroom” and “helping students to see how working well outside can help them to do the same in English and Maths”.

Celebrating success
Creating regular opportunities for successes and achievements to be recognised and celebrated is very important in outdoor growing projects with SEN students. Where work is being undertaken off site, it is particularly important to “allow students the opportunity to have their achievements valued back at school”. Hosting open days/visits and taking part in shows/events are other ways in which students can “talk about and take pride in what they’ve achieved”.

“Outdoor growing can help students to develop work-related skills, such as using tools safely”