

Seeds of change

A project is involving children in Education for Sustainable Citizenship, explain *Isabel Bleach* and *Annette Rawstrone*



The aims have grown as the project has progressed to include the development of a more appropriate and comprehensive ESC curriculum auditing toolkit and a national accreditation scheme for ESC in the early years – the Kent Education for Sustainable Citizenship Award – to be launched later this year.

‘It’s important that ESC is taught in the early years because basic attitudes are formed in early childhood. Understanding concepts such as thrift, empathy to nature and wildlife and to others at the earliest stage is imperative,’ says co-founder of SchemaPlay John Siraj-Blatchford.

COLLABORATION

SchemaPlay has been working in intensive collaboration with the six settings – Brenchley Pre-School in Brenchley, Greenfields House Day Nursery in Folkestone, Smarties Nursery in Maidstone, Beltinge Nursery in Herne Bay, Little Learners Pre-School in Sellindge, and Wiggles Playgroup on the Isle of Sheppey – and has worked with a key person in each to support the educational outcomes of two target children across the EYFS curriculum.

‘This has provided us with evidence of children’s learning journeys and evidence of the effectiveness of applying our SchemaPlay model,’ explains Professor Siraj-Blatchford. ‘We also provided support. This led to the development of ESC targets for further curriculum develop- ➤

A child wearing a lemur mask and tail runs off to hide as her nursery friends close their eyes and count. It’s a game of hide-and-seek with a difference – the girl is also wearing a transmitter, just like the collar that is given to endangered lemurs, and she is located by children acting as rangers and using radio telemetry tracking equipment.

Through the game they are learning how wardens use technology to track and protect the lemur population in Madagascar.

This game is just one fun part of a collaborative project involving six early years settings in Kent, with a focus on promoting Education for Sustainable Citizenship (ESC) in early childhood across the local authority. It is based on the three pillars of sustainability:

- **Social** An ethical responsibility to do something about human

inequality, social injustice and poverty.

- **Economic** Developing a sustainable economic model to ensure fair distribution and allocation of resources.

- **Environmental** Not taking our natural resources for granted and protecting our planet.

UNESCO states that, ‘Education for Sustainable Development allows every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary to shape a sustainable future.’

The Kent project, which started in October last year, has been developed by Kent County Council Early Years and Childcare Service and SchemaPlay, with the initial aim of devising ESC resources to be used across the authority to introduce children during their free-flow play to topics such as consumption, recycling, respect for different cultures and diversity, as well as conservation.

Little Learners at Sellindge Pre-school, Kent is one of the six settings involved in the project



Children involved in Madagascar

ment and to the delivery of bespoke whole-staff training sessions. Many of the targets set by the pre-schools have already been achieved and others are securely on schedule.'

The children taking part in the project have shown great enthusiasm and empathy towards sustainability issues and considerable development in social interaction and problem-solving.

Unexpected outcomes include children learning how to tally in order to survey different means of transport, promoting walking instead of driving to pre-school and children getting involved in developing their own outdoor play environments. A visit from a Chinese grandparent led one pre-school to develop multilingual education, and focusing on economics education has inspired children across the settings to create their own shops. Some children even grew their own hyacinths at Christmas and sold them to parents in order to raise money for new resources.

Professor Siraj-Blatchford has noted that some early years professionals are surprised that literacy and numeracy are important elements

in ESC. 'Mostly when people think of sustainability, they think about the natural world, sometimes about biodiversity and climate change. We have found that we have to explain that, from the UN Sustainable Development Goals downwards, one of the major priorities for education for sustainability is to reduce inequality and underachievement,' he explains. 'The alleviation of poverty, disadvantage and underachievement is recognised as a priority and a major barrier to sustainability.'

INTERDEPENDENCE

In ESC it is not enough for children to just learn about the natural world, it is important that they learn that they can take action to protect it, which is how the game of lemur hide-and-seek came about. SchemaPlay wanted to promote the concept of ecological interdependence and how all living things depend on their natural environment and each other for survival.

They approached the Aspinall Foundation, an animal conservation charity that works in conjunction with two animal parks in Kent, for help and it was suggested that it would be good to focus on the lemur because it is critically endangered.

If the lemur becomes extinct then their absence will negatively affect numerous other species sharing their ecosystem.

Using story books and footage of lemurs in their natural environment, the participating children have learnt about the species – including enjoying doing 'lemur dances' – and really grasped the importance of conser-



MORE INFORMATION

- www.schemaplay.com/Kent.html
- <http://worldomep.org/en/esd-scale-for-teachers>
- www.justgiving.com/campaigns/charity/jaf/SavingLemurs
- *Lots: The Diversity of Life on Earth* by Nicola Davies (Walker Books)



The 'children's collage' poster

vation to the extent that they have launched a campaign with the aim of raising money and awareness to help save lemurs in Madagascar.

'They have also seen images of children in Madagascar engaging in conservation action, so they know that they are part of a global movement and not just doing it on their own,' says Professor Siraj-Blatchford.

The game of hide-and-seek was introduced as a way of demonstrating to the children the procedures used for tracking down endangered lemurs in order to monitor them and also to develop empathy and the ability to recognise their interdependence with the natural world. Money raised by the children will be used to fund the work of wildlife rangers in Madagascar, including buying more radio tracking equipment. The event was timed to coincide with World Wildlife Day on 3 March, which aptly this year had the theme of 'Listen to the Young Voices'.

The children have also launched a billboard campaign to raise awareness of the plight of lemurs beyond the Kent early years community and to promote further donations. Children from across the six settings are featured in a poster of a lemur made up of a collage of their own faces.

'It may be some years before they fully understand the importance of biodiversity and of the actions that they are taking, but for now they are exercising their right as identified in the UN Convention to have a voice on all matters that materially affect them,' says Professor Siraj-Blatchford. 'They are learning to care about the natural world and they are learning that they can take action to protect it.' ■

CASE STUDY

'We believe that we need to teach our children the impact that we make on the world and the importance of looking after our environment for their future and that of others. We live in an egocentric and throwaway society and children need to learn the impact that we have, and could have in a positive way, on the wider world. They also need to learn the value of money and that they can make decisions about how it is spent,' says Jacqui Hodgson-Pope, manager of Little Learners at Sellindge Pre-school, near Ashford, Kent.

'The children have enjoyed the ESC work and have been proud to share what they know and what they can do. We have seen them replicate their experiences in their play and this has cascaded down to other children who have

been learning by copying them. We have seen other skills develop, including literacy and numeracy.

'The lemur project is involving the children in a large campaign. It is teaching them empathy and that people's actions have a direct impact on a species and on the wider biodiversity, because losing the lemurs would affect a whole ecosystem. We are learning that if a situation is managed differently then this species can be saved. Taking part in this memorable project should support our children's learning for a long time by seeding the fact that we can all make a difference.'

