



LET NATURE DO THE TEACHING

Headteacher Gary Spracklen explains how great educational thinkers and modern research led him to prioritise natural outdoor learning spaces in his primary school.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, I was continuously grateful for where I live.

Not because I live in a mansion with an indoor cinema, games room or library.

And not because my property has fast broadband connectivity, energy efficient lighting or the very latest in ergonomic furniture.

No, it was because I have something as simple as a garden.

Having an outdoor space I could call my own during lockdown was wonderful, and it's where my family members have spent the vast majority of their time.

Outdoor space is important, even more so of course



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in times when our movement is restricted. I felt for those families without access to outside space during lockdown. It made me think about how, in normal circumstances, children in schools without appropriate outdoor learning environments are missing out.

The need for children to develop naturally as part of nature and be considered "connected" to their environment is not new and can be traced back to the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century.

He said: "Put children in natural surroundings and let them develop...the mind should be left undisturbed till its faculties have developed. Nature wants children to be children before they are men."

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His student Friedrich Fröbel, who coined the word kindergarten, did not want us to just observe plants

and animals but to follow everything through to the source and see how everything connects.

At the school where I am headteacher, The Prince of Wales School in Dorchester, Dorset, we are fortunate to be blessed with outdoor space.

Having lots of outdoor space is only as useful as you make it and we work hard to ensure our provision has the greatest impact on learning for our whole-school community.

Indeed, as a philosophy, we see our outdoor learning spaces as just as important as the internal learning spaces which we have also spent time developing in recent years. The two must sit hand-in-hand to sustain learning and deliver impact.

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He believed that we are all part of nature itself and one of his first recollections was when one of his grammar school masters made him realise that the tree, though complete in itself, is part of a larger whole. It takes from the soil and the air and gives back to both. One of his observations on children was "...the contemplation of a stone or plant often led to profound outbursts upon the universe".

The story of The Prince of Wales School goes back to the early 1990s. At that time there was a need for more first school places in Dorchester (for children aged from four to nine), so it was decided to build a completely new school.

It was to be on a site next door to a small special school on Maiden Castle Road, a mile away from the Iron Age hill fort.

The special school was for pupils with physical disabilities, and it was so small that it was struggling to survive.

Its chair of governors felt that the children were not getting their entitlement to a full curriculum, and closure seemed inevitable. But in a moment of vision the decision was taken to integrate all the pupils from the special school into the new school.

Twenty-five years later, we have a thriving, fully inclusive and community-focused school with an integrated unit for children with physical disabilities.

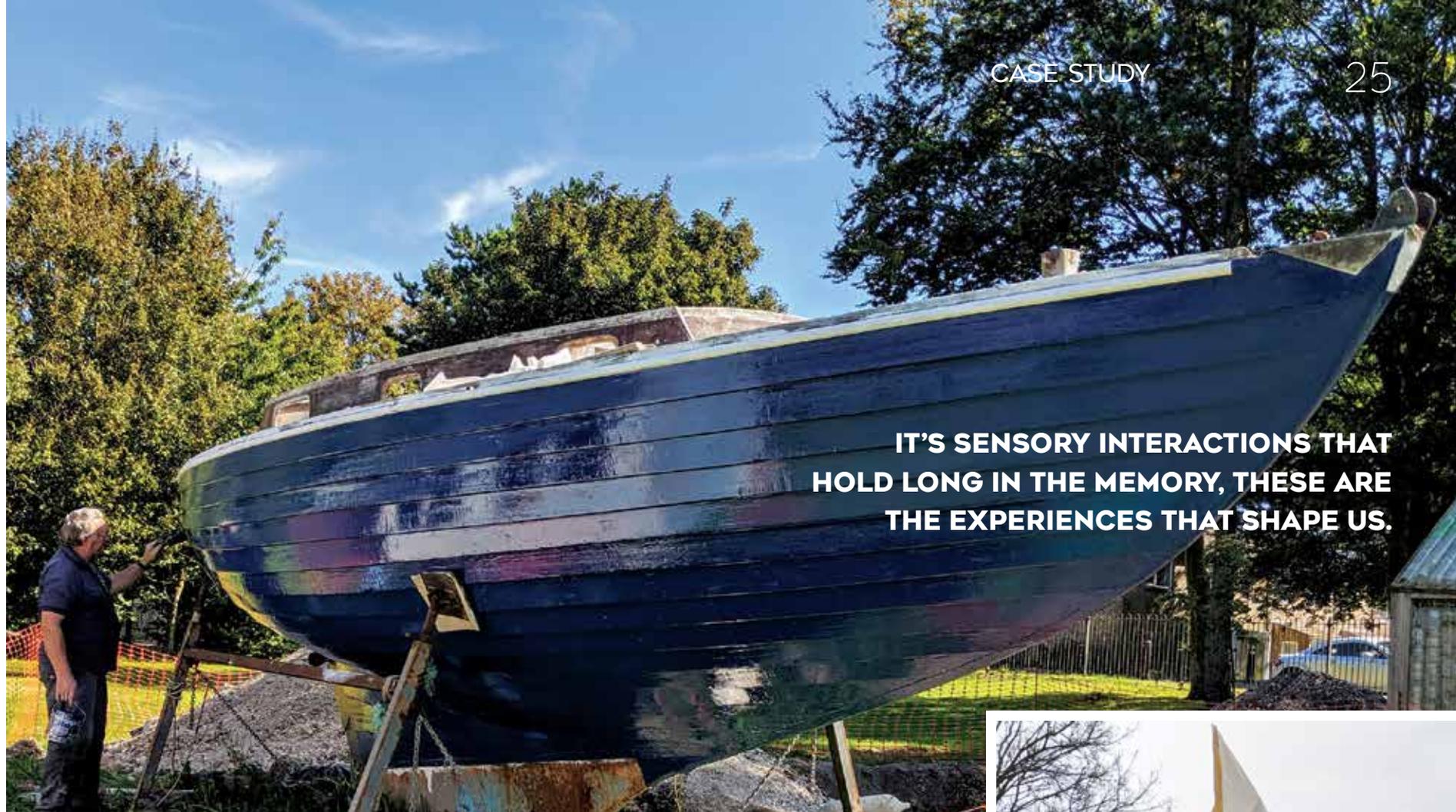
Our purpose-built school has a particularly impressive design and is spacious and practical. It is set in its own extensive grounds which currently include play fields, playground, environmental studies area, orchard and outdoor teaching areas. There are hedgerows, imaginative play facilities and a reconstruction of an Iron Age settlement that is developed each year by the oldest children.

As headteacher, it's been important for me to break down barriers and lead on maintaining and growing the use of our outdoor provision. A Guardian article published in March 2016, revealed the shocking truth that three-quarters of UK children spend less time outdoors than prison inmates.

Young children today are growing up in a world that is changing more rapidly than in any other time in history – technologically, environmentally, socially, politically and culturally. My challenge is to inspire them to care, preserve and develop this world in the future - to connect them with nature and provide a relevance that goes way beyond any artificial experience generated by technology.



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To address the challenge, it's important to first acknowledge the barriers -

- Dangers from traffic
- Health and Safety - obsession with a "zero-risk" world
- Parental fears of "stranger danger"
- Negative attitude of some authority figures to children's "natural play".
- Past - and sometimes present - role of nature conservation organisations
- "Busy" people
- Smaller gardens
- Peer pressure

The perceived "standards agenda" can be added to these as it can cause tension even when delivering the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) Curriculum. EYFS recognises the importance of the outdoor environment for optimal learning and development.

However, researchers have explored the tension between this child-centred rhetoric and the political standards agenda which remains the dominant discourse in the UK. It reveals it is a key factor in why access to outdoor environments remains limited for children.

In the development of outdoor spaces at The Prince of Wales School, we have looked carefully at the research on the developmental impact of "landscape-based" play spaces as opposed to "equipment-based" play spaces.

Much of this research indicates that equipment-based play spaces are much more focused on physical development rather than emotional, cognitive and social development as in the more natural play-spaces.

Synthetic, generic outdoor areas are still very evident in today's Early Years provision and, although these areas satisfy the requirements of the EYFS, it's my belief they respond more to adults' need for health and safety, cleanliness, order, tidiness and, maybe, the pressure from glossy catalogues, than to child development. At The Prince of Wales School we have been keen to develop a different approach.

While still evolving, this is steered by these five guiding principles:

- Seek more landscape-based play spaces instead of equipment-focussed outside areas. Why do you need these spaces? Always focus on the "Why?" before the "How?" and the "What?".
- When planning outside spaces consider future sustainability - a rose garden could deliver some amazing inspired writing for your next Year 5 Tudor unit of work but who is going to tend to those roses in the meantime?



**TREAT THE OUTDOORS AS AN
EXTENSION TO THE CLASSROOM.**

- Allow children to have as many sensory interactions with nature and natural materials as possible. This point links back to Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Fröbel. It's sensory interactions that hold long in the memory, these are the experiences that shape us.
- Ensure access to the outdoors is available as much as possible if not all the time. Treat the outdoors as an extension to the classroom.
- Use technology outdoors - It's easy to think of technology as being something we just use to support learning inside the classroom. We seek to use technology outdoors in an integrated way so it does not provide "nature through a lens" but supports the child's relationship with nature. Things like bird box cameras and weather stations can really support here to connect and inspire young minds.



If the principles above steer us, it's our community that powers us to move forward and break down the other barriers previously listed.

"Community Makeover Days" have now become a monthly staple of my school calendar with the majority of work being focused on improving our outdoor provision.

Days like these which see families come together for the good of the school give me hope that the future of our planet will be safer in the hands of young children who have grown up feeling a connectedness to nature.

This ideal, against the backdrop of a global climate emergency, can only serve to underline the urgency of preparing young people for their future responsibility as caretakers of the earth. ■

Gary Spracklen is headteacher of The Prince of Wales School, Dorchester. He is a former Digital Educator of the Year and a member of the UK Government's Educational Technology Action Group. Gary was recently named on the #Edtech50 "People of 2020" list by The Education Foundation.

