



CASE STUDY

Martenscroft Nursery School and Sure Start Centre, Hulme, Manchester
Winner, Best LOtC Provision for Early Years in the LOtC Awards for Excellence & Innovation 2011, sponsored by Learning through Landscapes

About the Nursery School and Sure Start Centre

Learning outside the classroom is part of everyday practice through all levels of provision at Martenscroft.

As part of a visioning exercise a few years ago, the staff team made a direct commitment to extend children's learning through first-hand experiences and to offer every child a curriculum that reflected not only their stage of development, but also their own unique and individual interests. The whole observation, assessment and planning system within the centre has been reviewed and developed to allow for this to happen.

All members of staff have received training on the importance of outdoor play and there has been funding dedicated to this over the last few years. Training (both external and internal) encouraged staff to think about taking the whole curriculum outdoors in meaningful and creative ways with an emphasis on the role of the adult in providing quality LOtC experiences. Following the training, a new 'Outdoor Play and Learning' policy was written. The policy was launched at a parents evening, and time was taken to explain the philosophy behind LOtC opportunities (in every weather).

The staff have an excellent knowledge of the EYFS curriculum and are adept at planning creatively to deliver the six areas of learning in a cross curricular manner using both the indoor and outdoor environments. An 'Outdoor Learning' policy has been developed that guides the work of the staff and informs parents of the clear philosophy behind learning beyond the indoor classroom.

Every child takes part in LOtC visits, regardless of their needs or circumstances. For example, the nursery has purchased double pushchairs and often takes children out in wheelchairs. Creative staffing means the correct ratios of adults to children are in place for educational visits and a robust risk assessment system ensures the safety of all children.

Funding has been sourced from many different avenues to ensure that learning outside the classroom can take place. The centre incorporates a nursery school and sure start centre, which work very much in an integrated manner. Funding, staffing and expertise are shared to ensure the centre can offer a whole range of experiences and events across a very diverse community.

Outdoor Play and Learning at Martenscroft

Martenscroft has an outdoor space that incorporates a fenced, soft surface area specifically designed and resourced for the babies. This is a gated area, giving them the safety and security to move between indoor and outdoor play areas in the same way the older children do.

The majority of the children at Martenscroft will not experience visits to the beach, and the centre wanted to build on their obvious interest and enjoyment of playing with sand and water. With this in mind, the staff worked with a builder/joiner on a bespoke design and the installation of large sand play areas. This allows the children to experience the nature of sand and encourages collaborative and creative play.

The design and use of Martenscroft's outdoor learning provision was commended by Ofsted: "Stunning outdoor provision ensures children have the space to enjoy a full range of exciting activities. Exceptional care has been taken to create a natural environment for children in the middle of urban living using sand and water play, dressing up, building and constructing, creating music, playing in dens, as well as digging and planting in the allotment area. This is an outstanding facility." (School and Daycare Inspection Report, March 2011)

The whole of the EYFS curriculum is planned to make use of LOtC whether it is within the centre's grounds or further afield. Particularly successful activities have included:

Boy's Development Project

This project was designed to engage all the children, but particularly boys, in writing and drawing. Children encouraged to take part in large scale mark-making and painting outdoors, having the opportunity to chalk in large spaces, paint on the floor and on large canvasses and write on white boards attached to the wall. 'Writing to Go' rucksacks allow children to carry their essential mark-making resources with them, and the freedom to be creative on a large scale, rather than an allocated space or table has sparked their imagination and interest.

Aliens Love Underpants

This popular story has been used to inspire range of different learning and play. The children (and adults) build rockets from crates and wooden blocks and then 'taken off' on journeys to the moon and outer space. Adults have captured the children's imaginative story telling at these times and transferred them into speech bubbles to be displayed on the space station (the outdoor stage area!). The learning has been further extended by encouraging the children to write letters to aliens.

Nursery Rhyme Cottages

Martenscroft have transformed small wooden houses into 'Nursery Rhyme' cottages to underpin work on extending role play opportunities for the children. Children have enjoyed a number of different scenarios, for example, 'Mary, Mary Quite Contrary', with stimulating resources to provoke language development and imaginative play. These opportunities give the youngest children wonderful sensory, collaborative and language immersed play in the outdoor learning environment.

Water play

Imaginative water play takes place all the time and Martenscroft have put a particular emphasis on using very open-ended resources, for example guttering, pipes, buckets, bamboo etc. The children design and build their own water channels, often spanning wide areas of the outdoor learning space. The installation of a water butt has aided children's independence in gathering and carrying water. The collaborative nature of this, has led to increased interactions and the

development of wider vocabulary. It has heavily impacted on the children's problem-solving capabilities, their self-esteem and social skills.

The outdoor provision is accessed in all weathers. We believe strongly that children should experience the elements and learn from them. To aid this, investments have been made in waterproof suits for every child. Over the last winter, the snow and ice led to wonderful sensory and scientific play and investigations. Rain and puddles have not only led to splashing around it, but also to bubble making and paint mixing on a large scale.

LOtC and the Wider Community

The Allotment Project

The Centre's owns and allotment area and children are involved in growing and harvesting their own fruit and vegetables. The produce is brought into the centre and made into meals, either by the children themselves or by the kitchen team.

To build on this, Martenscroft have recently joined the Manchester Museum Community Allotment Project. The Manchester Museum is hosting an allotment in their courtyard from April 2011 to October 2012 which links with the museum's vision of working towards a sustainable world and the opening of their new Living Planet gallery.

The project "explores the connections between all living things, including us, and shows how we can all shape the future by the choices we make". The allotment is being created by volunteers, visitors, community groups, university scientists and students. The project encompasses a range of people including pupils and families from Martenscroft. There is a vast range of knowledge, experience and skills - some know a lot about gardening and some are absolute beginners – but the basis of the project is to share skills and develop a love of the outdoors.

Developing Explorer Sacks

One particularly valuable piece of work with Manchester Museum was the development of 'Explorer Sacks.' Children and adults from Martenscroft made a series of visits to Manchester Museum over a period of six weeks. The children, ranging from age 3 to 4 years, explored the different spaces and objects within the museum using a range of resources.

Each week the visits were directed by the children and built on their previous responses and interests. The animal explorer sack was used to inspire children to hunt for different animals and explore their movement and habitats. The staff used digital cameras and post-it observations to document children's unique and individual learning journeys. The children were enthused by their visits and responded in a range of ways back in the centre. They created large paintings on canvas and developed a jungle in their outdoor area. A workshop was organised for the families of children involved, where experiences, activities and achievements were celebrated.

There have been a range of valuable outcomes from this partnership project. The impact has been seen not just on individual children, but on the group as a whole and on the provision offered at the museum for all families that visit them. It has led to the museum identifying new early learning opportunities for the under 5's and embedding play based, child initiated hands on experiences into their visits. The new Explorer sacks were trialled and used effectively to encourage creativity within the Museum.

The impact on children's attainment was marked throughout the project. Their language and speaking and listening skills developed greatly, particularly for those with English as an additional language. As a centre, Martenscroft are now committed to providing children with a succession of visits, rather than any one-off events, so that interests and learning can be built upon.

Children's Voices Project

Alongside the work with Manchester Museum, Martenscroft have established creative links with art galleries and theatres. Through a project entitled 'Children's Voices', children from the centre have visited Manchester, with a particular focus on the Big Wheel in city centre and the Royal Exchange Theatre.

Each child was given a digital camera to record their observations and significant learning interests. The children made very powerful observations and the impact of their journey was reflected in the skills and creativity used to recreate their experiences back at the centre. Their confidence and assurance was marked and the persistence they showed in detailing their learning was immense. Many of the children overcame fears on the visits and redefined their role and place within the nursery; often becoming leaders within their peer groups. Wonderful mapping skills emerged as they detailed their journeys and the use of vocabulary was greatly improved.

Promoting Community Cohesion through Creativity – Parents and Children Together

With funding from the Big Lottery, Martenscroft is currently running a '**Celebrate Together**' Project. Funding is being used to deliver a series of creative experiences for children aged 6 months upwards and their families, based on the themes of Indian dance and storytelling, African music and culture and carnival celebrations. The first celebration event, was held earlier in 2011 with over 100 adults and children joining a carnival parade through Hulme, accompanied by a drummer and dancer.

Everyone carried masks, banners, beautifully decorated umbrellas etc. and the event culminated in a party at the local Zion Arts Centre, with storytelling and dancing provided as part of the entertainment. These experiences help nurture a sense of belonging and cohesion within the school and centre community, whilst embedding a true celebration and understanding of each family's unique identity.

All the LOtC opportunities offered by Martenscroft have been very successful in terms of engaging the children's interests and making an impact on their achievements across the curriculum. This is particularly relevant to Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Communication, Language and Literacy Development and Knowledge and Understanding of the World EYFS profile point scores. The overall aim is to instil a true feeling of ownership and belonging within and beyond Martenscroft and to generate a love of learning that will last a life time.