

The benefits of horticulture projects for Young people with SEND including those on the Autistic spectrum.



Liz Paisley
Deputy Head
Lakeside School
Welwyn Garden City



Summary

This case study provides details of a work-related learning project based around horticulture for a group of students with severe learning difficulties and complex needs who are on the autistic spectrum. The case study illustrates the benefits for students with autism of working in this type of environment and explores the journey from a small project to the new opportunities which arose and were developed through collaboration.

Key lessons learned

- In order for the project to work we needed to ensure that preparation was in place as to what was expected from the collaborative working.
- Clear risk assessments and sharing of behaviour support plans ensured that all those involved were fully informed and able to support the students.
- Good communication links between school and [Mudlarks](#), a community garden in Hertford, both on a daily basis and also through sharing of termly plans ensured the success of the project.
- As with any project there have been issues that have arisen, however there has been on both sides a willingness to overcome any difficulties.
- The project has addressed individual needs recognising learning opportunities and meeting emotional needs and in addition the school has been able to recognise this through accreditation.
- It is important that as a school we have not allowed the accreditation to drive the project but have developed it to meet the needs of individuals and aid their progress.
- The benefits of the project have led to further collaboration and plans for increased Work based learning opportunities for this group of students.

Introduction

Lakeside School is a school for students with severe and complex learning difficulties in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire. Students are aged 2-19 and about a third of the students are on the Autistic Spectrum.

Mudlarks is based in Hertford, Hertfordshire. It is a gardening project for people of all abilities, particularly those with a learning disability or mental health issues. We offer horticultural therapy, training and work experience in horticulture, conservation and environmental awareness.

What we wanted to achieve

The project began in September 2010 as Foundation learning was being introduced to Key stage 4 and 5 students and further opportunities explored for students at Key Stage 4 to take part in work related learning. Students had been given opportunities to work within school, shadowing various members of staff and had some experience of work through Opportunities days. Having seen the benefits, which included increased confidence, a reduction in behaviour issues and new skills being developed, this was something to be embedded and extended.



Mudlarks was an established horticultural project running on a site just outside of Hertford and contacts were already in place as it was run by someone who had previously been a teacher at Lakeside.

After initial visits and discussions the first group of three students attended for one morning each week supported by two teaching assistants. The project aimed to develop the learner's social and communication skills, life skills, their ability to work as a team and develop their experience of a workplace in the local community. Evidence of their progress could be used as part of their accreditation, which provided a record of their activities and recognised the students' learning in a formal manner.

Outcomes and impacts

The project has now been running for almost three years and the benefits to the students have been immense. Students are able to interact with their peers and develop relationships that they may find difficult in school. They also interact with others from different settings, "chatting" at break, turn taking and waiting their turn. They are developing new friendships and work alongside different people including males, as there are only two of these at school!! The environment meets the needs of the students with autism as there is plenty of outside space where students can find room to be alone - benches away from the group, areas that are safe yet



separate where a student can find space. There is space for exercise and plenty of opportunities for heavy work, digging, use of wheelbarrows, raking and so on so fulfilling sensory needs.

Although outside and relatively close to a railway line (a particular bonus for one student!), the noise levels are low and one student who uses ear defenders in school for the majority of the time hardly ever uses these at Mudlarks.

The students have had significant opportunities to learn new skills such as use of tools, drills, saws, hammers and they have also been taught how to use these safely. In addition to this they are developing their life skills through making tea, washing up and looking after their personal belongings, all important learning points in moving into adulthood and independence. Correct social etiquette can prove difficult for our students, but there have been opportunities to discuss this within the project including for example how we feel about other students that we like and appropriate behaviour. This is more effective when related to a real life situation.

The students each have individual raised beds where they can plant seeds and plants, look after them and watch them grow. They harvest these and take them home after sharing their achievements in school assembly. As a result their self-esteem and confidence has grown. The students have developed their ability to work as a team and support each other and any behavioural issues have decreased considerably. They are developing their problem solving and becoming more independent.

There are two dogs at Mudlarks, firm favourites with the students and these can be used as motivators, taking the dog for a walk around the site being a desirable activity. They have also learned how to care for the animals and give them water and treats.

Some students have had the opportunity to go off the Mudlarks site and work in the local community, capitalising on developments in Mudlarks, as they have gained new contracts in the local area. Other students have been able to access Mudlarks during holiday periods, which again has provided age appropriate activities during holidays and some respite for parents.



We have seen skills that students are learning at Mudlarks being transferred to school and home. More recently, one of the students made his own film about Mudlarks which he narrated and which we have edited. He enjoys his time here immensely and this is reflected in his mini movie.

Not only has there been a significant impact on the students involved but the staff have also had positive learning experiences. Some staff were not too enthusiastic about spending a morning outside in the cold, however all thoroughly enjoy their mornings and this is in part due to observing the impact on the students and their learning in this different environment, as well as the opportunity for them to learn new skills.

Parents are extremely pleased with their son or daughter's participation in the project, valuing their achievements and this is an added bonus. At a recent Annual review, video footage of a student at Mudlarks was shared with his parents who were amazed and delighted to see how much their son learned and how well he worked in this different environment.

What we are taking forward

The project is producing some evidence for progress towards Personal Progress Units and this continues to be built upon and developed. In addition we have started our own off site horticultural project (September 2012), again supported by Mudlarks, but for students at Key Stage 5. This provides an opportunity for students to embed and build on those skills that they have learned in a different environment and enables us to ensure progression.

Through working on an after school club with Groundworks, Hertfordshire the site has been further developed to provide a fire pit, a story telling circle and a sensory trail.

More recently we have been given the opportunity for a bigger project on the same site. Plans are being developed for a garden centre/ animal care facility which could provide both supported employment opportunities for students with autism and other learning difficulties. In addition there would be opportunities for sensory experiences for students with more complex needs. This needs further work with education and social care to ensure sustainability in the future including creative use of funding.

How we are sharing it

As part of the LSIS group we are sharing our knowledge with the other providers and intend to continue the group to promote opportunities for young people with SEND

Further reading

www.lakeside.herts.sch.uk

wordpress.mudlarksgarden.org.uk

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Provider names : Lakeside School and Mudlarks

Sector coverage: Schools working on the 14-19 curriculum and possible developments with colleges.

Contact information: Liz Paisley e-mail: paisley_liz@lakeside.herts.sch.uk
Vic Hobson e-mail: vic@mudlarksgarden.org.uk