Independent Thinkers and Learners:
Critical Evaluation of Growing Together Schools Programme

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Growing Together was set up by Trust Links as a community garden to address unmet need in Southend-on-Sea by providing a nurturing and supportive environment. At Growing Together we have been providing therapeutic gardening and training for adults with mental health problems since 2000, which makes a significant contribution to their wellbeing and recovery. We were delighted to extend our services to support children from Milton Hall Primary School, responding to the behaviour and engagement needs of some of their pupils. It has been a pleasure to work with the excellent staff from Milton Hall and our own Trust Links staff to develop and implement the Growing Together Schools Programme. It has been a delight to get to know each of the children and see them grow in confidence, self-awareness and independence whilst having a go at gardening, building bug houses and trying new food. I am proud to have been involved in developing the programme, which I believe is a model that can be replicated to help many more children in the future.

Matt King, Chief Executive, Trust Links

During the Academic Year 2012-13 Milton Hall Primary School’s Year 6 cohort presented many challenges. One particular group within this cohort were completely disengaging from the curriculum and appeared disaffected generally. This impacted upon their behaviour and they became at risk of exclusion. Knowing that these pupils needed a different approach to learning we sought alternative provision. Thus the partnership between Trust Links and Milton Hall began and the Growing Together Schools Programme was born. The project was (and is) a great success with pupils engaging not only with the project but also back in the classroom. It is evident self-esteem, independence, behaviour and academic progress improve. The project has continued to go from strength to strength and we still send pupils termly currently funded by the LA. From a school perspective it has enabled the learning needs of a group of pupils to be met equipping them with learning and coping strategies and the confidence to tackle challenges when they arise. This has enabled them to cope with the more structured approach in the classroom and has also benefitted their classmates and teachers as there is less disruption to the learning. Raising aspirations of all our pupils is at the core of everything we do and working in partnership with Trust Links has enabled us to ensure all pupils at Milton Hall become the best that they can be!

Debbie Priest, Headteacher, Milton Hall Primary School
Introduction

The Growing Together Schools Programme was initiated by Milton Hall Primary School in partnership with Trust Links in Summer 2012. This was done in response to the needs of a group of Year 6 children who were not engaging with formal classroom based education. Since this time, the programme has responded to the needs of a range of children, including those with behavioural issues, withdrawn children, unmotivated and sheltered children. The programme design combines the Forest Schools/Outdoor Learning and Nurture Group approaches. It provides an alternative education for a small group of children one day per week over the course of one term.

Background and Context to the Growing Together Schools Programme

The Growing Together Schools Programme aims to grow children into independent thinkers and learners.

Growing Together is a community gardening programme run by independent charity Trust Links. The Growing Together garden covers approximately one acre of land in an urban area of Southend-on-Sea maintained four days per week by adult service users with mental health problems to encourage socialisation, confidence, mental and physical health and vocational training. It comprises of a vegetable growing area, wildlife area, herbaceous border and herb garden and is open to the general public throughout the year. Trust Links also manages a second Growing Together project in Shoeburyness, an historic orchard near Rochford and a service for carers of people with mental health problems. The programme is closed to adults on a Friday to enable the schools programme to operate.

Southend-on-Sea is one of Essex’s most deprived areas. Whilst it has pockets of affluence, some wards suffer extreme deprivation. Five Super Output Areas in central Southend fall within the 10% most deprived areas in England. One in four children aged 0 – 15 years lives in poverty (see Southend-on-Sea Borough Council and NHS South East Essex, 2010).

The programme is delivered in partnership with Milton Hall Primary School and Nursery, which is a larger than average-sized primary school. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups and who speak English as a second language is above average. The proportion of disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs supported through school action is well above average (Ofsted, 2014). Just over 50% of pupils are eligible for free school meals, well above the national average of 26%.
The Growing Together Schools Programme Approach

At its inception, the objectives of the Growing Together Schools Programme were as follows:

- To improve the engagement of pupils in education
- To improve aspiration and attainment
- To tackle behaviour and attendance through positive activities
- To develop key vocational skills

Children attend the programme, facilitated by a teacher and learning support assistant from the school and supported by a horticultural support worker from Trust Links. A group of eight pupils, selected by the school as requiring additional input, attend for a whole day per week for a term.

There is growing evidence of the effectiveness of Outdoor Learning - often in the format of Forest Schools - to improve children's and young people's self-esteem, resilience, building academic skills and the promotion of better health and wellbeing to compensate for missed nurturing experiences in the early years. The Forest School approach is especially on the increase in the UK and is a firmly embedded practice in Nordic countries (see Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012). In the UK, authors such as Ruth Wilson (2008), Sara Knight (2009) and Tim Waller (2010) highlight the effectiveness of Outdoor Learning and Forest Schools in improving outcomes for British children.

The Growing Together Schools Programme is steeped in the Forest Schools and Outdoor Learning approach and offers children from local schools the chance to engage with the natural environment and to model positive adult behaviour. The programme also draws on the nurture group approach, which aims to compensate for missed nurturing experiences in the early years through the provision of small-group teaching in a home-like environment (see The Nurture Group Network, 2014). The Growing Together Schools Programme works with pupils of mixed abilities to maximise their learning potential and provides exposure to genuinely new and challenging experiences. The project provides opportunities for contextualised learning of maths, English and science as pupils are encouraged to undertake a range of tasks and develop their problem solving skills. The project also encourages social skills that can be applied both in school and at home.
Evaluation Methodology

The methodology for the evaluation was developed by the Children and Youth Research Institute at Anglia Ruskin University in conjunction with Trust Links.

In the planning for the evaluation we focussed in particular on literature relating to theory of change, action research and participatory research and also some ideas represented in grounded theory and realistic evaluation. This approach values a bottom-up approach to evaluation that has helped with the challenge of developing a strategy that accommodates multiple-perspectives. The evaluation's ethical framework follows ethics guidance given by the British Sociology Association.

The sample group comprised of 9 pupils aged 10-11, 2 Trust Links staff, 1 school teacher and 1 headteacher and 5 parents/carers.

The methods used were:
- Semi-structured interviews with pupils
- Group interviews with pupils
- Semi-structured interviews with school teacher/headteacher
- Walking interview with parents and carers
- Semi-structured interviews with Trust Links staff

All the interviews were transcribed, stored using NVivo and analysed using the principles of critical realism (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) informed by an in-depth understanding of the intervention’s context and the diverse viewpoints of the stakeholders (Greene, 2000). We used content analysis to identify the key themes highlighted in the interviews (Huberman,1994; Spencer et al, 2003).

The participant-observation element of the study covered three separate visits to the project. During those visits I (researcher) spent time to get to know each of the pupils and became familiar with the programme’s routines. Through active participation in the activities I gained a better understanding of the pupil’s role and responsibilities and who, when and how decisions were being made. I ate and talked with the children to help build trust for the individual interviews and to better understand the different dynamics and features of the adult-child and child-child relationships on display.
Key Findings

The benefits of the project can be categorised into four main themes, which were defined and validated by the children during their interviews:

1. Learning new things
2. Personal independence
3. Changes in everyday practice
4. Friendships

Parents said that their children know more about gardening and where their food comes from. Family members felt children had learnt a great deal from attending the programme.
1. Learning New Things

Learning in outdoor surroundings takes different forms and is shown to positively impact on the child's adoptive, aesthetic, cognitive, communication, sensorimotor and socio-emotional development (Wilson, 1995). The participants interviewed in this study described what they liked most about attending the programme. They described:

“Doing activity, like the bug house and hide and seek…”

“Just planting and finding different ways to plant”

“Cooking mostly and making the dens and sitting in them, planting... yeah”

“Having fun, planting something and cooking”

Participants described the programme as being ‘fun’, and were totally unaware that their academic and social skills were being strengthened through imaginative and creative play. The children engaged implicitly with mathematics, English and science, which were embedded in almost all of the pupil-adult negotiated activities. For example, treasure hunts provided opportunities for the participants to engage with and categorise flowers and a variety of interesting plants and vegetables. Tasks are generally pupil-led and resemble imaginative and creative play activities.

A range of structured activities enabled the children to learn new things on the programme:

- gardening provided opportunities for participants to smell, feel, and taste natural materials.
- Den building is generally the most popular activity, promoting teamwork and negotiation skills.
- Digging in the garden engaged and motivated the children.
- Preparing the soil for planting and discerning whether to dig up existing plants if they are weeds.
- Planning the vegetable patch and planting the seeds and vegetables. This requires the use of maths through identifying the number of seeds required, working out growing times and space as well as the care needs of the soil.
- Cooking lunch from raw ingredients enabled the children to read and follow a recipe and also work as a team.
- Setting the dining table for the correct number of people.
- Selling plants and vegetables to the public gave the children the opportunity to use maths skills as they followed the full process of weighing the goods, calculating the costs, taking the money and giving change.

The range of activities at the programme is felt to have positively impacted on the children's learning and wellbeing. School staff reported that the pupil's involved in the programme have demonstrated better concentration, problem-solving skills, team work, motivation and engagement back in school. They have seen the children blossom under the programme which they put down to pupils being empowered to find a way of learning that matched their individual needs. With previous cohorts, the school also identified significant improvements in their behaviour, reduction in truancy and better engagement in their learning back in the classroom. Most, if not all, the child from the first three cohorts have reportedly made accelerated academic progress in maths, which is evidenced in the pupil's SATs results.
2. Personal Independence

The programme consistently promoted independent thinking and decision-making, through the development of social skills and adult-pupil encounters. The pupils are collectively involved in decision-making and the adults encourage all of the participants to contribute to discussions and conversations. This is made possible through the small size of the group.

The school staff note that the children have benefited from being outside of the formal classroom environment. An exemplifier is that pupils have been able to use and practice problem solving skills and practice collective decision-making in a less structured and time pressured setting.

On the pupil’s return to school they report back to their class teacher and classmates on the day’s activities and bring back samples of what they have discovered.

A central tenet of the programme is about giving responsibility back to the participant for decision-making. When a participant has a problem or query, teaching staff tend to give the thinking and decision-making responsibility back to the participant by asking them, “what could you possibly do about that?” or “what do you think?”. This strategy values and promotes the participant’s independent thinking, encourages them to practice and become confident in problem-solving and most importantly validates them as agents in their own learning.

3. Changes in Everyday Practices

The Growing Together Schools Programme provides a unique opportunity for many of the children to learn gardening skills and then to apply them at home.

Parents and family members have observed changes in a number of the participants. One parent reported that the programme has helped her son broaden his horizon and he now thinks more about what he can do to help at home. Parents also report that participants have started to pot their own flowers at home and one participant who would usually help his father in the garden has now started his own vegetable patch.

“Unfortunately where she lives - in a flat - they do not have access to a garden. When she comes to my house she loves it and she brings me the plants. I know she loves it because on Fridays I always pick her up, and she’s always talking about Growing Together.” (Participant’s Nan)

4. Friendships

The children felt that an important aspect of the programme was forming new relationships and friendships with other pupils. They learnt to work together in a team and to become more confident. The group processes at Growing Together enabled the children’s strengths and skills to be identified and built upon. Activities such as den building enabled children to build trusting relationships and work together to solve problems.
Further Research

Further research through a randomised control study could be commissioned to directly compare changes in educational attainment in school for pupils not engaged in the programme with those that are involved in the programme. This would verify the initial findings identified through this qualitative evaluation.

Conclusion

The Growing Together Schools Programme is a unique approach to addressing children’s learning and development needs. It provides opportunities for learning in the natural environment, which prior research has shown to have a positive impact on attainment and wellbeing (Wilson, 1995) combined with the nurture group approach.

This critical evaluation of the programme has shown that it has delivered strong contextualised learning opportunities for children in maths, English and science, whilst making learning fun through imaginative and creative learning opportunities. Children on the programme have blossomed and this has been evidenced in the SATs results of the first three cohorts of pupils.

Children on the programme have a range of learning and developmental needs; the school has found that the Growing Together Schools Programme can be used to begin to address a range of needs of pupils to help them grow in confidence, build social skills and assert personal independence. As the programme is fun for the children, they have been engaged and motivated through the range of positive activities and approaches that are deployed.

The programme has enabled the school to build stronger relationships with the children’s parents. Moreover, parents report that their children have learnt a great deal from the programme and it has broadened their horizons and engagement in activities at home, particularly gardening.

The Growing Together Schools Programme enables children to build new relationships with adults on the programme and friendships and social relationships with other pupils on the programme. It has enabled children to take their own initiative and regulate their own behaviour and learning, impacting on their attainment, wellbeing and prospects for the future.
References


