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Enjoy and Achieve: finding opportunities to action the *Every Child Matters* framework to provide opportunities for children and adults to work collaboratively on an outdoor learning project

EMMA SNOWDEN

ABSTRACT *Every Child Matters* (ECM), an agenda for agencies working with children, was introduced following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié in 2001. Lord Laming produced a report that proposed a new way of working for all professionals working with children. In June 2003, under a Labour government, the first Children's minister was appointed and the ECM agenda was actioned. The agenda outlined *radical* change for children's services and individuals working with children. In 2003 I was employed as a science teacher in a South East London mixed comprehensive. I implemented and managed the Healthy Schools initiative. At the time I struggled to find a tangible definition of ECM and what form it could take in a school setting. Now, working with students, training to become professional educators I introduce ECM as a framework. It enables individuals within an educational setting to start to share ideas that are context specific and relate directly to those it affects. In order for the framework to be successful it needs to be focussed and recognise all successes, small and large.

Introduction

Using *Every Child Matters* (ECM) as a framework, encourages teachers to respond flexibly to the school community, and also target individual needs appropriately. A framework suggests room for reflexivity. Large scale

organisational change involves careful planning and commitment. Teachers contribute to a wider agenda of whole school improvement but it is actually the whole school community that makes it a success. The subject of this article is my experience of the ECM agenda in action.

Our schooling system has the opportunity to capture children's interest, innovate their thinking and equip young people with the necessary skills to challenge aspects of the world around them. According to Hammond & Feinstein (2006), if we start with the child and create a school community and ethos where children not only feel safe, but are also able to learn and flourish, regardless of academic ability, the evidence indicates that chances of a good health outcome are markedly improved in comparison with those who did not engage with school. The presence of ECM enables health care professionals, teaching assistants, technicians, parents, carers and teachers to have a shared understanding of how schools work in order to support and care for the children in them. It is both an organisational tool and a catalyst for change.

I believe education is the key to improving the health of our young people. In 2005/6 I undertook research to explore how children learn when engaged with a project. That project involved the development of an on-site school organic garden. A background in Environmental Science and an interest in wildlife equipped me with the necessary skills to take on the school Environmental Garden. My research was concerned with both the teaching of science and exploring the impact of shared goals on children's interpersonal relationships and personal dietary choices. The garden was used as a vehicle to engage and enthuse students in the science curriculum and health related issues. It aimed to encourage children to share their experiences, learn from each other and transfer their learning from one aspect of their life to another, making informed choices. I used the National Healthy Schools Standard (NHSS) as a vehicle to fund and justify the existence of a school garden.

> ….NHSS has sought to reduce health inequalities, promote social inclusion and raise pupil achievement. (Warwick et al, 2005, p. 698)

The five outcomes of the ECM agenda are:

Be healthy
Stay safe
Enjoy and achieve
Make a positive contribution
Achieve economic well being

Clearly there are links between NHSS and the five key outcomes of ECM. Another relevant document is the *Healthy Living Blueprint for Schools* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004a). This blueprint also endorses the five key outcomes. How these themes manifest themselves is dependent on the school context. As the NHSS requires schools to engage with auditing and action planning to address school specific priorities the impact of NHSS can be targeted to address local issues.

As a teacher educator in a Higher Education setting, I introduce the ECM agenda to trainee teachers. I present a historical backdrop and tease out the importance of getting to know the pupils we teach. We discuss a shared understanding of terminology and processes that colleagues use in order to proactively deal with situations that arise with children and young people. Together we explore the tensions involved with handling sensitive conversations and issues concerned with child protection. To make ECM a reality I introduce case studies, pupil feedback and personal experiences. In practice ECM can be successful only if it meets the needs of the school community. Being aware of school policy and understanding a teacher's role in an interagency approach to ensuring children's welfare, is essential to effective collaboration. Bearing this in mind a teacher's challenge is to establish a learning environment where all children are able to enjoy and achieve.

In practice a key aim of ECM is to provide adults working with children the opportunity to talk. A multi-agency team of professionals make decisions about what is best for children in schools. At an operational level, making time and space for discussion is crucial for appropriate and effective deployment of resources. For example; each Friday morning a speech and language therapist worked with the class involved with this project to develop communication skills with targeted students. Usually the strategy employed would be one of small group or one-to-one intensive intervention work. Generally, this happened on a withdrawal system, where the student(s) were removed from class and returned after their planned session. The class involved with this project exhibited issues centred on poor communication and interpersonal skills. Once the project had started rather than withdraw the students from the class, the speech and language therapist worked with us in the garden. She chose to work with the children *in situ* as she felt that the communication skills exercised by students, whilst in the garden provided a strong basis from which to move forward. She also felt that when working in the garden she could involve a number of students in the intervention, further encouraging the explicit development of effective language and communication skills. This decision was made collaboratively between two teaching assistants attached to the class, myself and the speech and language therapist. We chose this way forward because we felt it would expose all of us to the intervention, further supporting the individual(s) in this class.

A School Garden

Some may question why investments in projects, such as an organic garden, are considered important. In a culture of measuring academic achievement, what impact does creating an environmental garden have on learning and attainment? It could be argued that the intrinsic development of identity evolves from the social situations children find themselves in. Hence, where children appear to lack the necessary social skills, the development of school systems, such as a

school garden project, that 'transmit appropriate forms of cultural capital' (Gewirtz, 2001, p. 367) should be actively encouraged.

The Government set standards for eating and outlined suggestions to address health inequalities (Department for Education and Skills, 2004b, 2005; Falgate et al, 2003). Children are all different; they have complex learning strategies that are unique to their personal experiences and academic thirst. In combining academic education with tackling social inequalities, we have to consider the learning implications of children in a classroom/group environment. By encouraging young people to value their health and well being, and equipping them with the skills to make personal choices on a rational basis, we create the potential to enable them to make positive choices throughout their adult life. Hence, teachers have a responsibility to ensure that pupils are able to access not just the formal education outlined in the curriculum, but also the wider informal aspects of education. To encourage a modern culture of respect we need young people buy into, and feel part of society (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). Promoting multi agency working in school that encourages and establishes links with the wider community can help to support these aims. Interpersonal and practical skills developed can be transferred into adult life. To illustrate pupil participation in a group project I have chosen to present data from a pupil called Shelley.

Shelley's Story

This story will be based around entries to Shelley's growing diary and conservations in a taped interview where four pupils are present. The pupils involved are Shelley, Ephrem, Billy and Jimmy. All children involved in this extract are in year 8 and working at level 3/4. They are a low attaining group with poor literacy, numeracy and social skills. The conversations are taken from the second round of interviews 4 months into the second year of the project. Shelley is growing a type of Marigold called Tigers Eye. She has chosen to grow this type of Marigold because foxes have been a problem in the garden; they have dug up plants and turned over the soil, disturbing seeds. Shelley did some research with her mum and found out that the smell of Marigolds deters foxes.

Shelley's diary 5 July 2006 reads…

> Today when I got home I went and watered my flower…. It had grown 2cm long. I was glad that it had started to grow. Now I am happy so I took a picture.

Shelley was happy with the growth of her flower. Her excitement is evident in her writing. Pupils were each given an exercise book to record the progress of their seedlings that they had planted. Shelley planted her seeds in a pot on her windowsill at home. She wanted to do this with her mum. She chose to use two methods of recording the growth of her seedlings; she took digital photos to visually record growth and also measured them using a ruler. Her aim was to try

to minimise the impact of garden pests and ensure the best possible outcome for the seedlings.

In the interview the group was asked: 'did they feel each person had a job to do in the garden, did everyone have a role to play?' The group talked about Billy watering and how they worked as a team.

Shelley responded:

> ….it went really quick outside, yeah it's like you are out of school mode, when we were out in the garden, the time just flew by and you wished you were out there all the time.

Reflecting on time she spent in the garden Shelley explains being in the garden is very different to classroom based learning. She is also able to describe what she has learnt.

> *Ephrem*: About vegetables, animals and flowers.
> *Shelley*: We learnt how to plant things and how they grow.

Ephrem picks out very broadly some of the topics we looked at whilst working in the garden. Shelley expands on this and describes how for her homework she had taken home some Tiger Eye Marigold seeds and recorded their progress in her growing diary. By this point in the interview Shelley's pleasure at having succeeded and produced excellent work is obviously apparent. I believe her enjoyment meant that she engaged with the activity and felt that she was a success.

An interesting psychological perspective is discussed in Dweck (2000). Dweck explores how people react to different situations and organise the world around them. This interpretation of human behaviour is based around two theories, the 'entity' theory and 'incremental' theory. Firstly, the entity theory is ascribed to someone who acts as if they believe that people have a fixed capacity for intelligent debate and interaction.

> The entity theory, then, is a system that requires a diet of easy successes. Challenges are a threat to self-esteem. In fact students with an entity theory will readily pass up valuable learning opportunities if these opportunities might reveal inadequacies or entail errors – and they readily disengage themselves from tasks that pose obstacles, even if they were pursuing them successfully shortly before. (Dweck, 2000, p. 3)

Conversely, the incremental theory is ascribed to someone who has an expansive capacity for intelligent debate. This theory is based around the belief that intelligence is not a fixed entity but can be increased through effort and experience. For incrementalists learning can be an enjoyable challenge. Dweck challenges approaches to pedagogical practice and highlights to the teacher the importance of promoting an incrementalist way of learning. Working in the organic garden provides opportunities for students to take part in an activity where basic participation yields praise. This type of praise culture that shifts the

learning from what is learnt to how we go about learning and tackle situations encourages students to take ownership of their achievements by internalising the learning process and celebrating success (Matthews & Snowden, 2006).

Shelley's' perceived success appears to have given her confidence to speak about what she accomplished and why she enjoyed it. Her identity in the class and as an individual continued to evolve. She felt part of the team and has gained enthusiasm for science through working in the garden.

Shelley has not always had this type of experience at school. At the start of her second term at secondary school, in January 2005, she was moved down a set. I would like to highlight this as a significant moment in Shelley's school life. When she joined our class after Christmas she was quiet, studious and unwilling to actively take part in lessons. Previous teachers had known her as a chatty, happy person, who was committed to her studies. The decision to move Shelley was based on a lower than average end of autumn term exam result and, although her effort could not be faulted, she appeared to struggle with class-work and performed poorly in the exam. Although Shelley was no longer struggling with class-work in the lower set, she did appear withdrawn and subdued.

Ten months on the Shelley I interviewed was admittedly still a little shy, but proud of her work and achievements in the garden. She communicated confidently and effectively and my impression was that she was happy and appeared to be someone who I would describe as *flourishing* at school.

Conclusions

Educational sustainability has the potential to become sidelined in the current climate of workforce reform that focuses on achievement and attainment. Creativity in the classroom requires constant revival; this ensures that engagement is maintained as the student body and learning environment change in response to external influences. Contextualising not just the learning, but the process and implications of learning, embraces change and welcomes new ideas.

> Sometimes very small things make a disproportionate difference to the health of a school. Chaos or a complexity theory suggests that we might call them butterflies – very contextually dependent but often key to great change. (Brighouse, Undated)

Daniels (1993) discusses the theory of internalising social situations to create dynamic, independent individuals who can rationalise and articulate opinions. Vygotsky's activity theory supports the idea that personal development is based on 'face-to-face social interactions'. By providing quality opportunities for the individual to consider their 'functioning to the object world through a theory of activity' the author (Daniels, 1993, p. 49) challenges the reader to consider a more creative approach. An evaluation of the Healthy Schools initiative (2005) describes:

> …. one key theme recurred throughout their [pupils] accounts – pupils active involvement in activities was the key to success. (Warwick et al 2005, p. 703)

Dweck describes a mastery-orientated personality trait that actively enjoys problem solving (Dweck, 2000). The activity of gardening where outcomes can be affected by factors beyond our control has the potential to encourage positive risk taking and foster active involvement.

It has been suggested that a deficit in quality learning opportunities for personal development and life skills could be a contributory factor of 21st century social change. Taking responsibility for and learning from actions is instrumental in this learning process. Finding a way to challenge the *it won't happen to me* psychological truism by making consequences real and tangible is a possible way to convey an underlying health message and action ECM.

A school ethos supports students, by creating a positive enabling culture which aims to make learning an ambition for the whole school community. This positive learning ethos drives even some of the most disaffected individuals. I hope that the climate created, provided a safe environment that supported failure, and celebrated success. When speaking about working together in the garden the children talked confidently not only about science topics but also key skills such as teamwork, organisation and communication. Pupils valued the time they spent together and what they had achieved.

In my experience, *Every Child Matters* does not tell us how to teach or what to teach. It simply puts the needs of the child at the forefront of our thinking, thus promoting the holistic philosophy underpinning an important message. *Every Child Matters* provides us with a framework to drive positive change within the context of a bigger picture that strives for the achievement of personal goals and academic success for every young person.

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EMMA SNOWDEN is a lecturer in Education at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her areas of research interest are science education and learning outside of the classroom environment. She taught science in secondary schools in South East London for six years before she moved to Goldsmiths in 2006. *Correspondence*: Emma Snowden, Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW, United Kingdom (e.snowden@gold.ac.uk).