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Case Studies

HEALD PLACE PRIMARY SCHOOL

When Heald Place Primary planted the first trees in its orchard, five years ago, those saplings had a difficult start in life. “They were constantly being vandalised, with branches and twigs broken,” remembers Hatim Kapacee, the school’s head.

That was then. Now the once-derelict space opposite the Manchester school is a flourishing field and allotment, home to vegetable and fruit beds, and is the pride of the community.

“Before we fought for the space to be given to the school, it was seen as an unloved and unkempt area, and was open to abuse. By developing it, with the local residents in mind as well as the children at the school, we’ve stopped the problem. It’s become a focal point for the community, and they’re proud that we’re trying to make the best learning environment for local children. It’s lifted the area.”

Heald Place, and its 700-odd pupils have been on what Kapacee calls an “environmental journey” since he took over the headship six years ago. As part of a root and branch overhaul, rotting floors and leaking ceilings were replaced in the original Victorian building and new classrooms were built. At the same time, Kapacee took the opportunity to shake up the curriculum and work on building an environmental legacy.

He'd had his eye on that derelict land, realising that most of his pupils would relish the opportunity to play and study – as well as garden - in a green space. “We're an inner-city school, and lots of our pupils live in terraced houses with yards instead of back gardens – developing environmental education was an important priority for us.”

Signing up to WWF's Green Ambassador's scheme helped with this galvanisation, says Kapacee. “We talked to the children, their parents and the governors about what they wanted. The children were keen for a park feel, so we've revamped the playground with a slide and climbing frame, and we've got a growing alley, a polytunnel and some smaller planters, as well as some natural habitat areas and a bug hotel.”



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This, alongside play and quiet time space and a multisensory area, makes the field work very efficient. “It's totally secure, and there's always something for the children to look at – always something to add to their learning out here, whether it's a camp-fire or counting up bugs,” says Kapacee.

The school's outside space supports a vast list of other activities, from mentoring parents on recycling issues to helping students from the University of Manchester with a micro-finance project involving selling herbs from the allotment. There's an annual “Bake Off” for parents and a “Dads and Lads” cooking club using school produce. “We realised that some of our boys didn't get to spend much quality time with their dads, but by giving them the time, ingredients and space to cook together, we've seen some lovely interactions.”

“The thing which makes me proud and excited is hearing the children talking about green issues and the care they take over some of the projects,” enthuses Kapacee. Take Habitats For Wildlife. “It's hands on, so the children develop practical skills and a caring and nurturing ethos.”

All this work doesn't do itself, though, and Heald Place has its own eco champion, a senior leader teacher who also heads up English as an Additional Language and Health and Safety at the school. She also concentrates on building environmental issues into lessons for all year groups and helping colleagues teach them. Training teachers is also her job, ensuring what's been built up will stay at the school in the future. She's clearly doing a good job as Heald Place won Green Ambassadors School of the Year in 2015.

Kapacee is keen to stress the importance of the sustainability of any environmental projects a school decides to take on. "Of course, you need the vision and belief – that environmental issues are crucial for children's' education – to kick things off, but you also need to think strategically about what things to do – will they still be working in a decade? And will you have the right people to make it happen?"



Heald Place has become an attractive option for teachers, based on its environmental credentials. "The enthusiasm is infectious," he laughs. "Obviously we can't take our eyes off the core issues, but projects like Green Ambassadors enhance and add something very special to Primary education," stresses Kapacee.

"Six years ago, I couldn't say with confidence that my children cared about the environment, but I definitely can now. The opportunities are never-ending. There are so many avenues to explore to keep the enthusiasm and excitement alive in the school."