

# Multi-cultural Aspects of developing Urban School Grounds

## Multi-culturalism as a concept

I used to run Chinese Festivals in primary schools. When approaching schools for their interest, I was struck by many of the replies. 'We do not need a Chinese festival in our school. We do not have any Chinese or other ethnic minority children here. We have no problems.' It is sad that in many instances the concept of multi-culturalism has been brought into the limelight because of the significant proportion of ethnic minority children in particular schools. Multi-culturalism is not an idea that is only for the benefit of children whose country of origin is not Britain. It is a central concept that recognises that everyone on this earth is interdependent and increasingly important to each other. In another sense, the presence of multi-cultural aspects in school grounds is even more important in areas where there is no ethnic minority community. Where there is no opportunity for direct contact with other cultures, the significance of multi-cultural activities may not even have been seriously considered.

There seems to be several aspects to incorporating multi-cultural aspects in school grounds:-

1. To strategically undo the harm that has been done in the non-recognition of the presence of other cultures.
2. To bring forward the missing contribution of other cultures and therefore to benefit fully from the richness and relevance of inter-cultural exchange.
3. To situate ourselves as participants working towards an integrated world, aware that how each of us see the world and how we subsequently act affects the future of the world and therefore changes each of our lives.
4. To recognise the essential role of the school in promoting multi-culturalism within the school community and in particular the contribution to the challenge to racism it poses at the present time.
5. To recognise the role of a school ground project can play in initiating the process of the full participation of the whole school community and its role as a catalyst for community action beyond the school.

The school ground is a powerful environment, symbolic of how we see children within the world we live in. We send out messages as to who we think they are or are not, who they can be or may never be through how we manipulate the elements within a school ground. In schools with ethnic minority children, multi-cultural elements within the school grounds provide a setting which enables children from ethnic minorities to see themselves as full members of a multi-cultural community instead of as alien survivors in an exclusive world. In schools without ethnic minority children, children are enabled to see themselves as growing up within one of the many cultures in a multi-cultural Britain. One little school in the country, in an all white area, took the position that, ultimately, contact with other cultures was all important as part of growing up. It twinned itself with an inner city school with ethnic minority children and ran exchange days. Children spent whole days learning together in each other's schools.

## Project examples

One of the most successful projects from the Black Environment Network is **the cultural garden**, a garden with plants representing the countries of origin of the children in a school. It provides a vital recognition of presence for many children, and acts as a springboard for further multi-cultural projects for the school and the community. One of the most important aspects of this project is that it explodes the myth of the English garden.

One of my friends who is a horticulturist, said to me, 'If only the English knew, an English garden is nothing more than a collection of glorified foreign weeds!' Indeed, one of the most important reactions resulting from the planting of the first cultural garden at Walnut Tree Walk School was that children came back to school saying, 'I have Japanese plants in my garden!' or 'I have seen African plants all over the neighbourhood.' They began to notice the diversity of origin of the plants around them and discovered that the natural elements they have come across have been multi-cultural all the time. Tulips in window boxes or on road islands, so famous for being Dutch, came from Turkey. Red Hot Pokers glowing in front gardens come from Southern Africa. Indian Bean Trees stand against the Houses of Parliament. Every rose that flowers more than once in summer has been at some time crossed with a Chinese rose, in order to acquire the quality called perpetual flowering. Columbines, whose origin cannot be traced, grow in every country across the temperate latitudes. Honeysuckles from Japan train on fences, spectacular African Daisies from Africa in hanging baskets... It was just that they never knew.

Park Place Nursery School in Dundee worked for nine months to convert a flat grass area into a world garden with different levels, paths, trees, shrubs and a rockery. There are Scottish, South American, Chinese, Malaysian and Mid Eastern areas. The senses were looked at too as a theme. Bulbs were selected for colour, herbs were put in for taste, and prickly areas planned for touch. They involved an artist to work with the children to develop ideas for a welcoming gate. The whole project did not just change the feeling within the school community. People stop to admire the school and say that the whole street has changed.

The multi-cultural theme of plants can extend to **indoor plants**, making a link with the plants within children's homes when they do not have the privilege of seeing gardens. The fact is, there is no such thing as an 'indoor' plant. Most small pocket books will tell you where your indoor plants come from. Here, excitingly, we find that the rubber plant comes from Malaysia. There, one plant can grow to look like a veritable forest. The Spider Plant comes from Africa. The Yucca is from Mexico. Cacti put us in touch with the deserts. Many other plants put us in touch with the rainforests and great forests of the world because they grow in the shadows of the huge trees - the quality which allows them to survive in our indoor environments.

In the bleak tarmac bound setting of the inner city, plants in the school grounds become the vital link to the natural environment. The **long term presence of plants**, native British plants and plants from different parts of the world, can mean shrubs or trees landscaped into the school grounds, or, for schools with very little space, climbers set in narrow beds transforming fences and walls or plants in tubs or flowerbeds. Plants in the school grounds can be linked to sections of plants in botanic gardens. Understanding of nature conservation issues can be initiated through visits to nature reserves. The more ambitious may aim to build up relationships with conservation projects overseas. **Twining** with projects in different areas of this country or other countries can be an exciting long term involvement. For example, a school has a special relationship with a National Trust property with beautiful woods. The Friends of Vrindavan project in Leicester links schoolchildren to a planting and conservation project in India.

**Short term projects** such as seasonal hanging baskets, herb, bulb or vegetable gardens allow for involvement through activity. They enable the ownership of small areas by different classes through the year. A school in Birmingham was able to involve Asian parents for the first time through a **herb garden** project. On this occasion, the Asian parents were the experts. They were the stars of the show, helping the school with planting expertise. The final highlight was the demonstration of the use of the herbs in cooking and a talk on medicinal uses. Such school ground projects can serve to initiate new relationships between ethnic minority parents and the school.

Projects can be based on the endless roles of plants. In various forms, plants from all over the world come into our daily lives, as imported food, as the base for essential medicines, as religious and social symbols, as elements of clothing, tools, furniture. Along with all that how peoples of the world work to make all these items to clothe us, feed us, make us well and happy! All this can form material to generate ideas and plan for elements in the school grounds, e.g. we can choose where the wood for playground furniture or sculpture comes from. All the ideas and projects named in this section can be **integrated through the whole range of the curriculum**, from planning through to years of evolving activities.

A school which wished to have a meadow had to take steps to reduce the fertility of the soil before planting. They did so through **planting wheat** for two years. From the harvesting they borrowed old hand implements from the local museum. Many old farming implements are very similar throughout the world. The Punjabi grandparents of some of the school pupils were able to show them how to use these for the harvest. They harvested the wheat together with the pupils and taught them the names of the implements in Punjabi. The common aspects of farming between different cultures were absorbed in a very real and practical way. New relationships were built between people. Common ground was found between different cultures and across the generations.

A theme such as **movement of plants** can echo the movement of people. If you ask for a list of plants for a British wildlife garden from an environmental organisation, you will inevitably find the Butterfly Bush, *Buddleia*, listed. It was/is however Chinese. It has become so much part of British ecological systems that it is seen as part of it. Literally, here is a Chinese plant with a British passport!

Why not study the journeys of **migratory birds** and incorporate them in a mural? When I was in South Africa, I saw British swallows escaping Winter in the African warmth. Or should I say that when I am in Britain I see African swallows coming to Britain in Spring?

**Painted games** can brighten up dull tarmac. **Murals** can transform inside and outside walls. Themes can be chosen to make links with ways of life and play an important part in the symbolic recognition of

the contribution of different cultures. They can be used as backdrops for plays, or poetry readings. Certain areas can be planned with enough seating for a class to effectively become outdoor classrooms with specific settings. **Features** can bring focus and meaning into the grounds. Hardwick Junior School in Derby designed a welcoming entrance with a colourful sign with all the languages in the school represented. They involved the children, their family and friends in researching ideas for playground markings and made dramatic changes to their playground tarmac. They have produced a booklet taking us through the process of involving parents and children in order to share their experience with other schools. They have also made a sourcebook of games from around the world that children can use during playtime. Another school aims to build a giant abacus, and make each bead into a globe with particular countries highlighted in colour.

Is there a chance of planning for **small animals** in the school grounds? There are beautiful angora rabbits from Turkey, for example. Children need to learn about the care and love of animals and can be allowed to take them home during the holidays.

Research can be done into celebratory **festivals from different cultures** and set into the school calendar through different years, using the school grounds as a setting. Linked to various traditions in different cultures, let's not forget that we can invent our own new festivals. **Ways of thinking** about nature from different cultures are very inspiring. For example this saying is attributed to Chief Seattle, an indigenous North American. 'What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beast also happens to the man. All things are connected.' These can be written onto little plaques and set into flowerbeds or at the foot of a tree from a particular country.

### **School and neighbourhood**

Projects can extend developmentally into the community and break into avenues which transform local life and local environment. The school is one of the most obvious centres for the dissemination of ideas and opportunities into the local neighbourhood, and remains a resource yet to be fully developed for truly transforming the potential of children's lives. Many schools will find that with all the best intentions in the world, they simply have limited space. And, although they can provide a stimulating environment within the school, for the children, everyday school finishes at 3.30 and life begins. Do the children then find themselves in a position where when the school gates shut, there is again nothing but a barren neighbourhood? The final reality of positive change means the integration of the potential for change and development within and beyond the school, which will give the child the continuity of experience of positive change. A school in Ireland, which had no space to speak of in terms of school grounds, identified some waste land locally. They asked for permission to adopt the land and built a beautiful school garden beyond its gates. The local authority in Southwark is creating a multi-cultural area in its parkland.

Thinking of the school grounds as a springboard for activities and linking up with local potential becomes a powerful basis for transforming children's lives. This is where networking with organisations such as Black Environment Network (BEN) can provide further support. A school does not need take on the transformation of neighbourhoods. It can initiate the idea through the school community and put interested persons who may wish to take on community projects in contact with BEN. BEN can facilitate the formation of new community groups and keep them in touch with current ideas and information concerning grants and contacts for expertise for projects involving the school and the community within or beyond the school grounds.

### **Maintenance and maintaining enthusiasm**

Maintenance can be one of the measures of the success of a school ground project. Successful maintenance can depend to an extent on the concept around which the school grounds are designed. There will always be elements which need expert care so that allowance must be made for a maintenance budget for contracting. Or, if one aims to acquire expert skills, initial training of responsible persons need to be planned for and then the skills passed on as parents or staff move on. The process of overall planning and the inclusion of elements of a particular character, such as a bed of Asian herbs, can help to build up the sense of ownership by particular groups such as Asian parents and stimulate involvement in maintenance. Those who are involved in the initial overall planning of the site will inevitably be the ones who feel that what results is truly theirs. Therefore, as far as is possible, one should take the time and make efforts to involve the whole school community. It is also important that the plan consciously allows for areas which are specifically for short term projects. These give repeated opportunities for having an input into planning new limited projects. The constant change continually stimulates a new relationship to the established grounds. For example, certain areas of the grounds can be planned such that a child rotates through the ownership of these as it grows through the school.

Even with successful and beautiful areas, there comes a time for remembering how the process of working through a project has benefited everyone, and for making the case for starting again. A beautiful mural may very well make way for another beautiful mural.

### **In conclusion**

Are you having fun? Are you having a fascinating time claiming your heritage to the cultures of the world? Along with all the learning and the hard work is the contact with interesting and wonderful people. We may make the discovery of how much a little child can know that we do not. We are about to collapse in a heap, and we find the energy to carry on when a child says to us, 'This is great fun. Can we do it every Saturday morning?' We find out how vitally we can all be in touch with a remarkable world of diverse cultures and environments. Multi-culturalism takes us into an adventure. It is a joy!

Two families from China came to help at the Park Place Nursery School during their world garden project. They had never gardened and did not have a garden in China. At the end of the morning, one mother announced, 'The garden is finished.', to be told by the other 'No, a garden is never finished.' This then was taken on as the school's ancient Chinese saying 'Ah yes - a garden is never finished.'

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