

Abbots Green Primary School Case Study

## Building on the Foundations of Learning



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Given the chance to build a new primary school where would you start? In Bury St Edmunds, the Leadership Team Alex Bedford & Amy Arnold took the opportunity to build a new school from the foundations up – both literally and metaphorically. Literally, because the school was a new build, and metaphorically, because Alex, Amy and the their team took the values of the foundation stage and applied these throughout the KS1 and early KS2 curriculum.

Abbots Green Community Primary opened in Sept 2005 after a 12-month build and today has 150 pupils from Foundation Stage through to Year 4, with a 12 place setting for children with moderate and complex learning difficulties. It is a first phase school in Bury St Edmund's tertiary middle-school system. At the centre of the new building is The Glazed Street. This is the central corridor of the building, some 50 metres long and 5 metres wide. But to call it a corridor is to do it a great disservice. It's tall, has a sprung wooden gym floor and is lit by natural light. It's a highly flexible space that serves as a classroom, a performance space, a rehearsal room – the uses are many. On either side of The Street, are classrooms, smaller learning environments, a fully interactive and dedicated sensory room that is used by all pupils in the school, storage spaces and a dedicated ICT suite. The classrooms and other learning spaces are themselves light, airy with windows at a level to suit children. Outside the building, the classrooms lead out onto a covered walkway – itself a space for play and learning. As it's a place where parents arrive to leave and collect their children, it makes sense for each classroom wall to have a dry-wipe whiteboard where teachers can post reminders and last-minute messages. The walkways enable children to work outside in all weathers and provide a seamless link between indoor and outdoor learning. Leading out from the covered walkway, there's a playground, playing field, an outdoor classroom, story-telling wishing well and, among other things, a Giant. Yes, you read that correctly – a Giant. More on that later...

But although all these features are of interest in themselves, what sets this building apart is its curriculum foundation. The development is underpinned by a strong curriculum vision developed by the

leadership team, by teachers, by parents and by the children themselves, as Alex explains,

*"Our vision for learning comes from our experience and from our teamwork. Over the past ten years, we have researched carefully and have learned an awful lot about how children learn. We thought, 'What do children need to learn?' We looked at good practice and we worked closely with parents, the local community and local businesses. The vision evolved and is still evolving but central is the belief that children should be at the heart of the curriculum. In everything we do we try and consider what children think and what stimulates them – we constantly ask ourselves questions like, 'what would we want if we were six?'"*

This school vision is based on Maslov's hierarchy of needs but translated into more readily understood terms. At the base of the triangle are 'physical' needs, followed by 'emotional', 'wondering', and 'learning' needs. The entire school building is designed to meet these bottom two levels of need. For example, the building's orientation ensures that plenty of natural light is available but also ensures that no direct sunlight intrudes harshly into the learning spaces. All the rooms are airy and the simple direct layout of The Street means that children are never lost, while the windows that look out on it also ensures that children can always be seen.



The drive to put teaching and learning at the heart of physical design even extends to unexpected areas of the school. Take, for example, the Leadership Team. Originally appointed as the Deputy Head, Amy Arnold and Alex Bedford have worked in partnership to develop the school and now see many of their roles as interchangeable. As a result, their two offices are to be merged into one. It may seem a somewhat banal example but it shows how embedded is this principle. And this principle even underpins

the design of the outdoor built environment. Remember the Giant we mentioned earlier? This huge sculpture encapsulates neatly the philosophy of curriculum-led design. The Giant or, as the children call him, Big Joe is an inspirational installation that children love to visit, play and climb on. It meets children's physical and emotional needs and provides that sense of wonder in play and learning. As Amy describes it,

*"We want our children to be 'free range'. For example, there are no climbing frames but plenty of places to climb. We want our environments to be not only physically and emotionally safe but also inspiring and stimulating."*

Sustainability has been an important part of the development too. Whether it's the timber frame of the building or the rain water harvesting system that feeds the cisterns in the toilets – environmental sustainability has been a priority and enabled the school to reduce its carbon footprint and save over eight tonnes of CO2 since its opening. This too is part of the curriculum vision and allows for good learning opportunities. The school has an energy efficient grass roof that encourages wildlife, which children will be able to observe when the school completes its plans for 'creature watch' webcams. In Alex's view the issue of sustainability also applies to staff; to manage their workload and ensure their dedication and hard work is sustainable too.



Technology has a part to play in creating these supportive and inspirational environments. Positioned in each classroom, in The Street and in other areas of the school are LCD screens that automatically display images and play sounds at breaks, lunchtime and other changes of school day. The school has no bells. Again this is no accident. It's part of the intention to create a calm atmosphere - particularly because the school has a high number of autistic pupils. "Actually," says Alex, "good strategies for autistic children are good for every child." ICT is fully embedded throughout the school, for example in wireless whole-school network, mobile learning technologies and the use of DVDs and digital resources for interactive whiteboards. Leading off from The Street is a dedicated sensory room that the children call The Den. It's a room with advanced lighting and multimedia technology for all children. It's designed to be comfortable, to provide rich sensory experiences and to provide a space for children to calm down when upset, to be inspired or to think quietly. It not only supports the physical and emotional needs of young children but also provides a space for wonder and learning. It's an example in a nutshell of how the curriculum vision has driven the outcome of physical building and used technology creatively. As Amy says, "Our objective in designing this building was to create a stimulating, welcoming warm place where children want to come

to learn and where they feel safe and secure. We wanted to make learning so irresistible that children couldn't keep their hands off it! And the building is a large part of this."

At this point you might be thinking, 'This is all interesting and good but what about my school. What can I take from this?' Well indeed, Alex was fortunate enough to be in post before the building work started - but that doesn't mean it was an easy process. Alex and Amy contributed many untold hours to the project and, although the building had a strong curriculum foundation, the close cooperation between all participants was essential. As Amy advises, "Don't try and do it all yourself – delegate. Build the capacity of your staff to take on responsibility and distribute leadership."



So, to answer that rhetorical question, there are perhaps four key aspects that a school anticipating a rebuild or refurbishment may want to take from the experience at Abbots Green.

- Ensure that any building or refurbishment development is driven by your curriculum planning – your vision for teaching and learning in the school.
- Plan for how technology and ICT will be built into the curriculum at the outset.
- Actively involve the whole-school community in planning and decision-making
- Build and maintain effective and collaborative partnerships with industry, suppliers, architects, builders and your local authority.

The results at Abbots Green are impressive. Building, curriculum, pupils and teachers all seem to knit together to create a vibrant, welcoming and enjoyable learning environment. If you were six, or sixty, this is a place where you'd want to learn.





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