

## **Sabbatical report – Leave period: Term 3, 2012**

### *An investigation of environmental learning at Primary School level in the U.K., with, where possible, a focus on wetlands education and environmental sustainability.*

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#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the Hurupaki School Board of Trustees, the staff, and particularly our Deputy Principal who acted in the Principal role for the term, for allowing me to undertake this professional learning opportunity and learn about something that I believe will further enhance wider student learning in our school in the future.

I acknowledge the NZEI and Ministry of Education for allowing me to have this sabbatical, and also for making this valuable opportunity available to the profession.

A special thanks to the Head Teachers in the schools in Britain I visited for giving so willingly of their time, resources and hospitality to enable me to develop my thinking on many different aspects of environmental education and of education in general. The collegiality we shared was much appreciated and it was a pleasure to talk with like-minded educationalists on issues that affect us all, no matter the country.

#### **PURPOSE**

The initial purpose of this investigation was:

To further develop understandings of environmental education and establish future directions in this area for Hurupaki School by:

- visiting and observing in British schools who have been identified as having strong environmental programmes and sharing ideas with school leaders there who have similar philosophies of how children learn;
- reflecting on and considering the implications that best practice around environmental education might have for teacher development at Hurupaki School.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Hurupaki School has, over many years, developed a sizeable wetlands area on the fringe of the school property. We have been fortunate to have the space and place to do this, as well as the foresight of previous school custodians in seeing the potential. The site of the 'wild, wonderful wetlands' was originally a swampy paddock used mainly for horses but is now an area custom-made for environmental hands-on learning.

Because we have this marvellous area and also a strong drive at Hurupaki School for developing the 'whole' child, all the children in the school are instructed in things environmental each week in each teacher's CRT (classroom release time). Our classroom release teacher is responsible for leading environmental education across the school, largely based on our wetlands. The younger

children start with observations and studies of the flora and fauna of the area, building up to an awareness and understanding of environmental sustainability, for the older children. Global issues are also covered as relevant, such as the importance of water; ecology; global warming; climate, habitats, etc. We have developed a comprehensive long-term plan that is highly successful with regular review undertaken.

To reiterate, we have in excess of 360 children on our roll, who are all involved in regular environmental studies, mostly based around our school wetlands area. One of our aims as a school is for all our school leavers to have a high awareness and knowledge of environmental issues that they are passionate enough to continue to care about and pursue in later life.

My main question when considering this investigation was, “what now?” How do we extend and develop our current environmental programme at Hurupaki and how do we do that without compromising the integrity of the existing programme? In what other directions could we go to enhance environmental learning in its widest sense? How do other schools implement this type of learning successfully?

When considering options and talking to colleagues in New Zealand, it was mooted that there were some innovative and unique programmes in schools in the United Kingdom regarding varied aspects of environmental education. So this was my starting point for this investigation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

I found that there is a push in the UK to develop an Eco-schools movement nationally. In most areas of the country, schools are encouraged to opt in to be a certain grade of Eco-school and win an award status depending on their ‘green’ activities. Much of the ecological education on offer for awards was about recycling and conservation of resources such as electricity. There was a much smaller amount of schools offering programmes about the use of natural resources and so research was carried out (largely on the internet), to find schools that were delivering types of environmental education suitable for this study, which proved to be very interesting.

I discovered a leading school that ran its own farm; a school that was considering generating their own electricity by constructing windmills; and schools with ponds, woodlands, gardens, animals, recycling programmes, general conservation and many innovative environmental ideas. So visits to these primary schools in different parts of England were arranged, each with a different focus, also a trip to the Eden Project was booked to look at their displays, designs and their teaching plans and resources used with visiting schools, year round.

Because the schools had been chosen for content and not location, the acquisition of an English-programmed GPS was crucial in finding our way around and arriving on time. In most cases, just a day was spent in each school with the back up of resources such as planning and curriculum documents and, of course, photographs, to take away.

A group of senior children at Hurupaki School made a short film about NZ, Whangarei, Hurupaki and our wetlands that I could take to show the schools I visited. I also gathered leaflets and pamphlets that the children had made about our environmental work as well as planning overviews and information for reciprocal sharing. This proved to be a good idea. The English children particularly liked the movie, complete with Hurupaki kapa haka group performance, and couldn’t believe the beauty of our local scenery and sunny weather.

## FINDINGS

The findings from the visits were not at all what I had expected. I found that, in most cases, the environmental programmes were done on a small group basis where children opted in to join the 'eco-club' or the 'woodland team' and it was more of a hobby experience rather than whole-school integrated learning.

The main reason for this it seemed almost without exception was that none had the time to do more than a minimum amount of work on 'extra' things like the environment largely because of the increasingly rigorous external demands each school had imposed on them. Rigid testing schedules, as well as the new ruling that inspectors with only a day's notice could make official visits to review the school and expect current school assessment data to be readily available, were taking their toll on the wellbeing of whole school communities. The Head Teachers I met were skilled, hardworking, lovely people but all were finding the demands imposed difficult and quite stifling for creativity or choice in how the curriculum was delivered in their schools. Teachers too were generally not in good heart and were in many cases delivering highly structured, whole class lessons in an attempt to meet the requirements. Teaching and learning had become a serious business.

Another factor that surprised me was that, because of the restrictive size of most of the school grounds, the school 'pond' was often more of a large puddle by New Zealand standards, the woodland walk tended to be just a few metres long and in the case of the school that wanted to generate its own electricity, the community had protested and this was not allowed to go ahead. I have noted that that Head Teacher has subsequently moved on from that school.

There was little whole-school work on environmental issues but more group work and activities such as 'light monitors' whose job it was to go round turning off unnecessary lights that had been left on. In general, just small groups of children in each school, had environmental knowledge and the opportunity to pursue this interest. The programmes had looked much more comprehensive on the websites but in practice were a small part of what these schools were about – or were allowed to be about under crippling country-wide curriculum restrictions.

To be fair, all these insights were formulated after observing for a very small period in the life of a school and my visit was near the beginning of a new school term, so it could be argued that my findings weren't typical of what was the norm. I did gather several school environmental learning charts and plans and other resources that had a most comprehensive setout of what was occurring re the environment during the year. As in NZ, there were strong references to cross-curricular links and, to reinforce my initial points, I wondered about the integrity of each subject – was the 'environment' lost in the other integrated (prescribed / higher profile) learning areas?

One school should have special mention, as it was a departure from the above, was the farm school I visited. It was part of the United Kingdom's School Farms' Network and was an extremely interesting concept. To quote from a Schools Farms Network publication:

*'Maybe it's the influence of chefs like Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver promoting home-grown healthy food, or, maybe it's the drive towards sustainability. It could even be a reaction to tighter economic times, but there has been an upsurge of interest in growing your own fruit and vegetables or keeping a few chickens in the back garden in the past few years.'*

*And this isn't just happening in homes. Figures from the [School Farms Network](#) show there's been a big increase in the numbers of schools that have farms over the last six years, too. There are now 102 schools in England and Wales, which have their own farm and 117 more schools planning to follow suit.'*

And from the school itself:

**'The rural idyll'**

*'School farms can inspire children, help them with academic lessons and teach them practical skills. But above all, they give children a wonderful environment to learn rather than sitting on computers during their free time. Childhood is very short and you want it to be a very special time that they remember.'*

*For any school, wherever it is located, having a farm on site where pupils work in harmony with the seasons, or can watch a chick hatch out of an egg, can't help but inspire what Ian Eggerton-Metters calls "a sense of awe and wonder – something that every teacher wants to instill in their pupils – it genuinely is real life learning."  
The school, as well as a farm, also has a Woodland club and an Eco club, with the children owing their own little garden plot to care for and plant in it what they will.'*

This school was the exception because the whole school was truly built around its beliefs in environmental education in the widest sense. Because of its status as an official 'farm school' there was the choice to make this a large part of what was taught there and how the school ran. In fact, in 2002, the OFSTED review suggested that the school could make greater use of its unique environment within the curriculum. So the plan began and by 2007, OFSTED was saying that the school was '*making a magnificent contribution to the environment*'.

It was a remarkable education for the children and of note was the support of the whole community. The programme could not run if the school families were not completely committed. The animals and farmland have to be cared for every day of the year, including Christmas Day and every holiday. This requires buy in from everyone in the wider school community and it was amazing to see this in operation.

The large school property, including the working farm and a 3-acre wood attached to the school grounds, was well set up with all the animal pens in one area, the children's own gardens in another and the usual playgrounds and outdoor learning areas elsewhere. They had a strong environmental ethic throughout the school and children were articulate and able to explain everything that was going on and the implications and issues involved. There was an environmental classroom where children could go and pursue other aspects of environmental education, such as sustainability. They would have a group cooking the food they had grown in the school gardens or children would be able to find out wider perspectives of what they had observed and learnt outside from the resources and lessons delivered there.

All in all, this was the highlight of the school visits for me. It showed full commitment to a way of learning that was unique. The amount and type of animals kept changed slightly during the school year depending on the season and maintenance of each area, but they generally kept bees, pigs, goats, sheep, chickens, rabbits and guinea pigs, all dearly loved and well cared for and managed. This was alongside the substantial woodland complete with bird boxes and habitats set

up for wild, woodland animals. The school had a high national award rating and had hosted Royal visitors fairly recently. I endorse what the Head Teacher said in the school prospectus:

*‘The environmental education that takes place here is vital to the development of the whole school and its wellbeing. All our activities have a significant impact on improved pupil participation, ownership, leadership for all, achievements and self-esteem. This impact encompasses not just the children, but staff, parents and the local community as well. We are an International School with children of many different faiths, colours and backgrounds. We reflect the rich diversity in our city and I am immensely proud of what we are all trying to achieve.’*

He has reason to be proud and I’m really pleased I was able to visit this school. I am not planning to make Hurupaki a farm school but I will take elements from their philosophy and practices for including and developing an environmental mindset.

The visit to the Eden Project in Cornwall also proved most worthwhile to my study. It consists of a wondrous set of biomes (huge plastic geodesic domes) set out to represent different ecological environments. There are two main biospheres – the Humid Tropical Biome featuring a rainforest where you can climb up to the top canopy many thousand feet in the air and the Warm Temperate Biome featuring plant species from the Mediterranean, South Africa and California. There is also an extensive outdoor area with gardens and many interactive displays and activities going on all the time, based on nature, science, environment, technology, eco-systems, sustainability, recycling and related topics. Schools can book in for visits and there is an experienced group of guides and educationalists to take them through their nominated programme. I came away with new ideas and useful teaching resources to adapt for our wetlands studies.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

In the first instance, I found it sad that the huge potential for wide educational opportunities in these well-appointed schools with skilled and thoughtful Head Teachers and staff members, were so stifled by government requirements. I felt that there was a real sense of frustration, and almost desperation, amongst the management and staff of each school with the dichotomy of knowing how real, deep rich learning occurs and of the methods and practices that they were having to employ to fulfill imposed external demands, which seemed to have little true educational purpose.

Even in the farm school, there was the same despondency about unrealistic, unworkable, unnecessary official requirements, although, as stated before, the Head Teacher was able to demonstrate greater flexibility, as the animals and gardens required regular care and so had to be part of what happened in the school on a daily basis. There was a separate set of guidelines for these farm schools.

Although I’m not sure I had my initial investigation questions completely answered as the environmental study seemed to ‘morph’ into considerations of the wider picture of education, I definitely had reinforced what is really important in education and how I will strive to keep this alive at Hurupaki School in spite of other external demands. In response to my overarching question – “What now?” - there are aspects of environmental education I have picked up on my journey that I will consider, to enhance what we have already at Hurupaki School. Such as:

- garden plots;
- fruit trees;
- creature habitats set up;
- five senses garden;
- sculptures from recycled materials;
- grounds timetables;
- global citizenship;
- set up a sustainable development committee;
- bird watching club
- develop school wetlands/environmental gallery for website
- bulb planting (to be naturalized) in area adjoining wetlands
- storytellers chair/area
- permanent wetlands resource developed and maintained

I will reinstate our environmental committee at Hurupaki School and redevelop our long-term plan for environmental education, incorporating some of the new ideas and directions I have discovered on my sabbatical reflections.

## **CONCLUSION**

This report may lead you to believe that I was disappointed and somewhat disapproving of the schools I visited. This is not at all so. I gained a great deal from the privilege of being able to visit these top schools first hand. The schools, without exception, were wonderfully warm, welcoming places where many great educational experiences were delivered. There was a lot going on in all schools and the children's overall education was to a high a standard as far as I could ascertain in the time allotted.

My point is that this is at a cost. Left alone, these schools are doing a great job of educating those in their care and more than achieving what they set out to do. Without the new and ever tightening regime, the education of these children is in good hands. My fear as a casual observer, is that this is being sacrificed for questionable benefits to children's learning, now and in the future. The price to be paid is teachers' enthusiasm and former commitment to make a difference. They are being worn down as 'one size is deemed to fit all' and can no longer take the time to use their unique talents to develop unique individuals.

In conclusion, I have to say it was great to be back and reflect on the educational opportunities we offer children in NZ. Schooling should be far from a linear, narrow process. I will strive to keep a rounded education where children become good communicators and self-managing, active, happy learners at Hurupaki School. How important that is.

## **REFERENCES**

References used in this report are largely observational and from own notes and photographic evidence. Written information from schools and places visited both in hard copy and electronically was also referred to. Schools and electronic sources have not been named in this report but are available on contacting the writer.

*Thank you for your interest and time taken in reading this report*

*Margaret Holmes (formerly Cameron)*