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School play areas have traditionally been uninspiring places, but that is changing. HESTER LACEY visits a school where pupils helped to transform a patch of grass into an enchanted garden

HESTER LACEY

Remember the grounds of your local primary school? Many of us were grateful for a rectangle of Tarmac with some hop scotch squares and a bald piece of grass sprouting blackberry bushes. School grounds are the most undeveloped part of the British landscape, says Guy Redmond, a garden designer who has chosen an unusual speciality - the transformation of the traditional dull Tarmac into an environment where children can play and learn. At the village primary school in Harvington, near Evesham, he has been working with pupils, staff, parents and the local community to do just that.

Harvington pupils bubble with enthusiasm at the prospect of showing a visitor round their play area. They have been involved in the project from its very earliest stages. This, says Guy Redmond, who learnt his business during five years as an LEA school grounds and planting officer, is one of the keys to success. Marcia Palmer, the head teacher, agrees.

"People make the mistake of giving children what they think the children want," she says. "Here, the children have been involved in the decision-making, the designing, planting and watering. They feel they own what they've created, and because of that they would never do anything to damage it."

So what did the pupils choose? The grounds are divided into three zones. The first is the usual concreted area for hoops and skipping games. The second is loosely themed around a medieval village, with a maypole as a focal point, a large wooden gazebo to gather under, a wooden fort, and a wooded path that winds along to the story-telling area, sheltered by three large trees and furnished with tempting log seats. The story-teller's chair is hewn from a huge section of log, and the wind in the trees behind it and the birdsong enhance the tales told there.

From there, the bark-chip path winds on to zone three, a wilder area with a mound to climb and a tunnel to scramble through, teepees, a young orchard of apples, pears and plums, long grass to lounge in and a secret place for making dens. "Children love nooks and crannies to hide in," says Marcia Palmer. "The dinner lady circulates at break time, so we are watching - but not on top of the children the whole time, so they have freedom to play and experiment."

Michael Carne, 10, was the pupil who had the inspiration for the mound - known as Michael's Mound to his friends. "I logged on to the internet and found an adventure playground site and saw a mound there, and I put it into a model I was making of the garden," he explains. "We all came up with the idea of the story-telling area and the walks," adds classmate Sarah Grant. Danielle March, 10, proudly shows off the ceanothus she planted by the garden sheds. Among the lavender, cistus, bamboo and hebes flourishing in the borders, Pippa Buettner, nine, points out a tradescantia that isn't just any old tradescantia, but the one she planted. "My favourite bit of the garden is the den-making area," she says. "There are bits of string and wood and you can make anything you want."

Anthony Watts, 10, thought up the tunnel. "I said as a joke we could have a tunnel for the teachers to hide in when they're feeling stressed, and they built one!" he says gleefully. Anthony is keen on the teepees, which double as prehistoric caves. "We played that we were the megatherium and the leotherium off Walking With Beasts, and a couple of us were sabre-tooths as well."

Christopher Hartwell, six, jumps on to the path with a ribwort "shooter", eager to demonstrate how to twist the plant's tough stem to make the seed head fly off. In the story-telling area, Charlotte Taylor, nine, and Emma Barber, 10, are playing more sedately. "We jump across the logs without touching the bark on the ground, because we're pretending it's dragon lava," she says. Although boisterous games are going on, there's an absence of the aimless free-for-all that can characterise playtime in a more conventional space; and there are plenty of nooks for quieter games, including two willow igloos.

The Harvington project has taken 18 months to reach this stage and has been a concerted community effort. The transformation cost around pounds 30,000, though Guy Redmond estimates that donations of materials, plants and labour push the total to pounds 40,000. The money came partly from a matched-funding grant, and a cash legacy bequeathed to the school. Two years of fund-raising by the Parent-Teacher-Friend Association gathered the rest, co-ordinated by Julia Hargreaves. She wrote to dozens of local firms, asking for help, and was amazed at the generous response - donations of material, cash and discounts. All the hard landscaping and furniture items have come from local craftsmen and stores.

Equally important was the parents' response; a small army of mums and dads spent weekends putting in the railway sleeper steps up the mound, installing paths, building and planting. The children's involvement was, of course, key. "With 30 children out there, you can move mountains," says Guy Redmond.

Has the pounds 30,000 been well spent? No question, says Marcia Palmer. "A minor point that was raised in our most recent Ofsted report was the children's boisterous play in a restricted area. At one stage we thought of making an adventure area, but that would have cost pounds 10,000 for a space that could take perhaps 20 children at a time out of 160 pupils. This is a long-term plan and it will be marvellous next year and for years after."

She envisages current pupils coming back to see how "their" plants and trees are growing. They can also be enjoyed by others; the grounds can be hired at weekends and during the holidays, for a peppercorn fee, and the local Jubilee celebration party was held there.

Guy Redmond agrees that their investment will pay off. "It's common for a school to spend pounds 10 or pounds 15,000 on fixed play equipment, but the money can be used much more creatively," he says. There is, he says, little point in spending on small facilities such as a single willow structure or a climbing frame that won't cope with heavy usage; wear-and-tear means that the useful life of a half-hearted investment will be short. A large-scale, integrated approach, he says, is more cost-effective in the long run.

Edith Cappell is similarly convinced. "I've taken the children out for science lessons, looking for bugs. And the grounds are also used for music and drama, not just for play; they contribute to the all-round curriculum, an education for life."

Perhaps most important of all, Marcia Palmer believes that this new vision of the great outdoors contributes to the spirit of the school and its pupils. "We are giving the children back the freedom to be creative," she says. "We had a vision. We didn't think little, we thought big. Making the vision into reality involved having the courage to take a risk, but it has more than paid off."

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