

Learning Journey: Abbots Green Community Primary School



At the heart of the school is The Glazed Street

The Space to Inspire

Abbots Green Community Primary School, Bury St Edmunds is a first phase school in Suffolk's three-school system. The school opened in 2005 with places for 150 learners, from Foundation Stage through to Year 4, including a twelve-place provision for pupils with moderate and complex learning difficulties. Alex Bedford and Amy Arnold share the leadership of the school. "Because it was a new build," says Alex, "we had complete design and control over



the build. It wasn't easy but everything – colours, features, textures, furnishings and layout – was created in partnership with architects, builders, staff, governors and parents. It was the first step, one of many, in creating an adventurous and stimulating learning environment."

A Psychology of Space

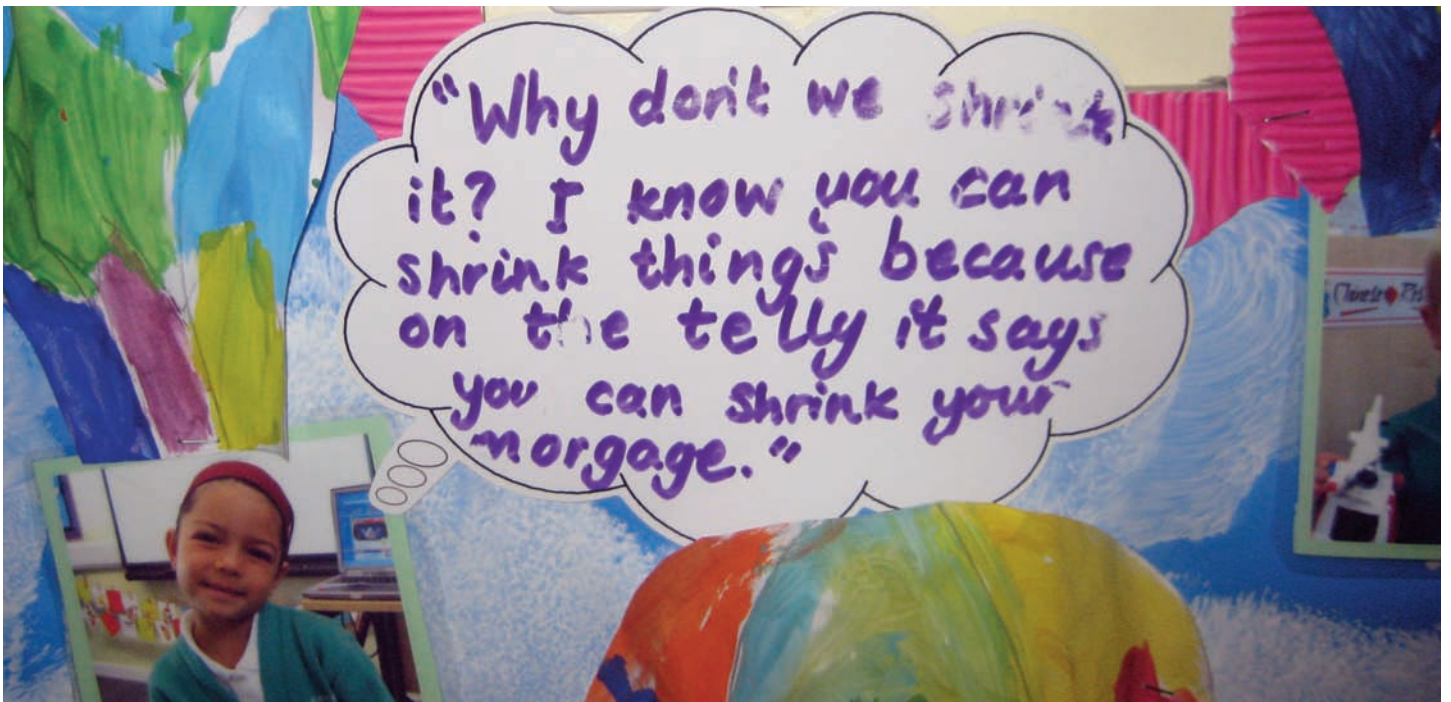
Almost every detail of space has been given thought in the initial and on-going design of the school. The design and use of space at Abbots Green is underpinned by firm pedagogical principles constructed out of experience, teamwork, research and a guiding principle in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The entire school building itself is designed to meet the physical and emotional needs of children. "There's a psychology to space," comments Amy, "that can have a big impact on children's attitudes." For example, the school has been built with the sun's rise and fall in mind so that classroom verandas allow natural light to flood learning space without

the blinding glare of the sun. Side, front and back windows give copious natural light with varying height of ceilings. The orientation of the school and positioning of windows ensure that classrooms feel open, spacious and light. It's supported by the choice of colour for carpets, walls, storage, and wet and dry areas.

At the heart of the school is The Glazed Street. It has a sprung oak floor, clean calm colour scheme and large three metre diameter windows in the ceiling. It's a very flexible fifty metre by ten metre learning space that can quickly become a classroom, a performance space, a rehearsal room or a play area for tag rugby, tennis, 'burning London', inspiration, soap-boxing and experiments. Elsewhere, pupils and teachers have access to multisensory rooms and alternative learning areas while around the school sofas, rugs, and Scandinavian furniture are used to create a warm and hospitable environment. Digital signage throughout the school is used not only for information and to share success but also to create environments and mood.

The physical and emotional needs of children are met too in adventurous and stimulating outdoor spaces designed solely through children's eyes with open ground, tree houses, digging and building zones – even an eighteen metre recumbent giant that the children have designed and named Joe. Learners have the opportunity to add and complement the outdoor landscape each year with project builds and developments in their power, "We believe that a place to play is a place to learn," comments Alex.

Over thirty per cent of the school has some level of SEN, with some classes operating at over fifty per cent SEN and statements



A curriculum designed around what learners want to know

running at thirteen per cent of the school population. "Therefore," says Amy, "our curriculum has had to be based around needs. Our learning space has to support these individual learning needs."

Areas of learning are built around the six areas of the Foundation Stage and continued throughout the school with teachers planning 'Frameworks for Learning' that change and adapt – guided by the interest of the learners. "We are passionate about a curriculum designed around what learners want to know," says Amy. "Pupils are encouraged to use techniques such as KWFL¹ and teachers use questioning and guiding techniques as the tool for the learning journey." Learning is first 'problematised' so that children's

1: KWFL - What do you already **K**now? **W**hat do you **W**ant to know? Where can **F**ind out? What have you **L**earnt?



Adventurous and stimulating outdoor spaces

learning begins with a question or problem that they must solve. For example, children might be using the outdoor learning space and, in their play, 'discover' a dinosaur's egg. The subsequent tasks demand and challenge children to choose and apply skill sets, rather than follow a dictated regime. Teachers accept that outcomes of learning will be sometimes unknown and different from the initial planning idea; says Alex, "We believe that curiosity is the friend of all learners."

Partnerships and Distributed Leadership

Creating the new school hasn't been easy. Both Alex and Amy emphasise the need for close cooperation between all participants in the new build process; and the importance of delegating and building the capacity of staff to take on responsibility. "If you can, distribute leadership," advises Alex. And although Alex and Amy may have had the advantage of a new build school, they did not have the luxury of a generous budget. The school was allocated £110,000 as its total budget for complete learning space and learning resources, all furnishing, total ICT, PE resources, administration and office set-up. Despite this, learners have access to a rich range of technology included a dedicated ICT suite, mobile wireless laptops, interactive whiteboards, digital cameras, data loggers, visualisers, media players, iPods, PDAs, projection and multi-sensory equipment. An integrated text

messaging system keeps parents up-to-date, although it is used less for administration and more for the sharing successes of their children. As Amy explains, "We managed to get this level of innovation on a tight budget, and fulfilled our aspiration for the school, through sponsorship, partnerships and long-term business arrangements."

Next Steps

Alex and Amy are optimistic about the next steps for Abbots Green, as Alex explains, "The future's green. We will refine and tinker with the fantastic foundations we've created." The school is expected to grow rapidly over the coming years and, says Alex, "We are planning ahead strategically, keeping an eye on the horizon, to ensure the skills, talents and ethos of the school are sustained, distilled and celebrated, not diluted. It will mean change and it will mean local authorities and governors reviewing their current practice, trusting us and being part of a really successful learning community."

To find out more visit the Abbots Green Community Primary School website at www.abbotsgreen.co.uk