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# Junior

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& Brooklyn have  
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# is this the most creative school in the land?

Think the National Curriculum is in danger of becoming tired and predictable? Not at an inspiring state school in Reading

**H**ow many schools start the day with a five-minute massage session? "We're teaching the children about the wholesomeness of touch, about acceptable and non-acceptable touching, as well as reverence for themselves and others," explained Sue Humphries, the headmistress of Coombes Infant and Primary School.

What about practising handwriting with shaving foam and chocolate mousse, or setting fire to your work at the end of term? All part of the educational experience – but quite exceptional in the realms of most traditional educations. It is, however, very much the ethos of a small unassuming, but very special school in Reading. "Finding something which has rich learning opportunities is what Coombes is all about," says Bill Lucas, the Chief Executive of the Campaign for Learning.

The reputation of a school often stands or falls with the head-teacher, and although she would probably deny it, there is no doubt that Sue is the power behind all that is remarkable here. Bill Lucas describes her as the "outstanding leader of a brilliantly creative school". Head for 30 years, Sue leads a comfortable and friendly all-female staff, who at first glance do not seem the likeliest of candidates to be constantly in demand to lecture at other schools, locally, nationally and internationally.

The school doesn't have the ideal catchment either. Although it's situated in a pleasant enough village, the pupil role of 200 children aged three to eight constantly changes due to the presence of a large army ►





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garrison. This year, 80 additional children had gone and been replaced mid-year, while 14 children had also transferred from other schools where they could not cope with “inflexible settings”.

Perhaps these waifs and strays fit at Coombes because it’s incredibly fluid. People come and go continually – foreign students scribble furiously on clipboards, a governor wanders in with a hammer and set of coat-hooks, another governor, up to his ears in glue, works with the children making Moses baskets. “Every day is an open day,” they are keen to stress. There appear to be no doors, which Sue agreed suited them. “Yes, we’re nearly all open-plan – it allows the spread of ideas and does away with the mystery of the closed classroom. Closed doors are quite frightening for children, don’t you think?”

Teaching groups are fluid, too. “We believe in peer-group teaching, with older children looking after younger ones,” says Sue. Some of the time children work within age groups, during literacy and numeracy hour, for instance, but the rest of the time they are in mixed-age “family groups”, led by one teacher who stays with them throughout their schooling. Teachers rarely work alone: “We prefer to work in pairs – we like the co-operation, support, and we gain from the breadth of ideas.”

Long-term planning is also done co-operatively, and the resulting curriculum is not one parents would readily recognise, although the school covers the requirements of the National Curriculum and has had glowing Ofsted reports. Instead of structuring work around subjects, it focuses on the calendar, with projects evolving out of seasonal events. Themes recur annually, so children build on previous knowledge as they grow through the school. Subjects such as science, literacy and art are covered as an integral part of these events.

**S**o exactly how does this school differ from your average state school? Easter term, for example, started with Epiphany. Children interacted with real camels in the grounds, and then ate a feast of dates, figs and unleavened bread. “You can’t understand Easter without Passover,” explained one of the teachers, and so Moses became the source of projects and ideas. During a single morning, one class studied Alma Talema’s painting of Moses, which led them to research and study Egyptian art. By the end of the lesson, some of the children were creating mosaics with tiles or computer graphics, while another group made paper. “The Egyptians were the first to make paper – papyrus, you see. We’ve used rushes from the nursery garden,” an enthusiastic parent helper explained.



Meanwhile, another group created Moses baskets, and were asked to predict whether they would float. “This year we’re using cork tiles and straw; last year we had a gift of wood off-cuts.” Later in the week, Palm Sunday was re-enacted with hobby horses and foliage cut from the grounds. Eggs gave them a chance not only to talk about symbolism, but also to try their hand at nest building; and on the last day of term, some Easter Bunnies visited and left chocolate eggs in their creations.

“It’s really important that you constantly try new things,” says Sue. How would she define their approach? “Child-centred. Our teaching is directed towards the pleasure principle. Children should laugh and smile as they make their way through the Curriculum.” And indeed they do – every term, or season, has similar events and projects, with real learning opportunities. The annual making of Christmas puddings involves maths (weighing and measuring), geography (plotting on the map where ingredients come from), economics





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(buying ingredients), working together, and, of course, cookery.

Autumn means Guy Fawkes and fire, so they have barbeques, re-enact the Fire of London, keep journals (like Pepys), and make historically accurate model houses, which they then group into a miniature London, and set ablaze, starting in Pudding Lane – again scientific predictions are made about the way the fire will spread. Literature, science, history, geography, craft, safety awareness and lots of fun. What if children want to keep their houses? “Oh they can, but they don’t usually want to,” says Sue. “They get a big buzz from the co-operative effort.”

In between these major seasonal events, there’s a myriad of smaller events – visiting musicians, live theatres all in a desire to “keep the Curriculum rejuvenated”.

**P**erhaps not surprisingly, competition between children is not encouraged, although Sue admits it happens anyway. “But we prefer to have them compete against themselves.” Early in 2000, Coombes school held its own Olympics. “We lit the eternal flame, released doves of peace, performed a flag dance and said the Olympic prayer. We then had a day of physical routines. When the Olympics then appeared on television, the children knew what all the symbols meant.”

Other sports in the school include T’ai Chi, line- and ribbon-dancing. A regular PE routine involves co-ordination and movement exercises around a vast parachute. Sue actively discourages footballs in the playground. “I find it quite disturbing the way the boys use footballs to collar the best spaces,” she says.

The Curriculum within the school is supported by the most amazing environment, which pupils, staff and community have created from

scratch. “I became involved with the school through my work looking at the power of external environments,” says Bill Lucas. “When you consider that ten years ago they had no trees, it’s mind-blowing. Now they have the most wonderful site complete with a mini-Stonehenge, an amphitheatre, every known species of willow, and ephemeral artwork taking place all the time outside – their playground is full of structured opportunities.”

Bridges, tunnels and dens are everywhere you look. Treehouses are used as classrooms whenever a teacher fancies it. A wooden lookout is under construction as yet another outdoor, inspirational workspace. But where does all the money come from? “Oh, I never wait for money,” said Sue. “I just get on with it. When you have an idea, you’ve got to run with it – you just have to make it come true.”

Sounds like a school governors’ nightmare – luckily they all seem to be right there with her, and the community is always lending a hand. A local hobby person – “we have lots of hobby people” – lent the Olympic-day doves for instance, and what better resource to call upon than the army? The barracks have supplied industrial machinery and manpower to recreate Stonehenge and to install other on-site monoliths. On St Andrew’s day a piper visits; the Ghurkha band has played for the children as well. Year two’s end-of-term treat was a visit to

the garrison with the chance to manhandle large instruments of death.

Monoliths and willow trees are not just a headmistress’s whim. They have an educational purpose, forming readily accessible and usable nature and geology trails. Another willing parent, Sian Gates, mother of Harry and Heidi, created and constantly updates an Intranet (a local computer network) on the school computers. Children access a map of the school grounds, with links to photographs of the onsite







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installations. A map of the UK links to the stones in the geology trail, so children can learn where the stones came from.

There are plants everywhere too – fig trees, 26 apple trees and a nut orchard. "We often need to cut our own sticks, so we use coppice hazel," says Sue. "Children can pick and smell things – it's a multi-sensory environment." Every year the children grow pumpkins and sunflowers to look at the seed-to-seed cycle. They design and create transport to harvest the huge pumpkins. Sunflowers lead naturally to maths work in estimating numbers of seeds and calculating height and circumference.

It is rare in a state school to have animals, but then Coombes is something of a rarity. It has among other creatures, a 15-year-old sheep who moans throatily at passers-by – no doubt when she does pop her clogs, Sue will use that opportunity in a creative way.

It all sounds like something of an educational utopia. But there's one big question: do the children actually like the school? "Yes – but it's not every parent's cup of tea," admits Sue. "We insist parents make two visits before deciding. We have an open-door policy – if they want to come, we'll make space for them."

Tom, seven who will shortly be moving on to the nearby junior school, but couldn't really articulate what he liked about his school: "I like all of it." How did he think his new school would differ? "There's nothing in the playground, and you get three breaks – we only have one at lunchtime." Is that something he is looking forward to? "No, it's better without breaks." Praise indeed!

Susan Rowe, the deputy head, obligingly attempted to get other comments from passing children. "What do you think, Iola? What do you like best at school?" Iola (seven) paused and considered earnestly.

"You," she said and kissed her teacher on the cheek.

Everywhere we went, children eagerly came up to the headmistress to show their work. Despite the lack of a distant authority figure, the children seem responsible and together, readily helping with class preparation such as setting out chairs, without being asked. In turn the staff treat children as willing, equal and eager participants in their education.

Even the nursery staff have high expectations of the children. A huge model of Elmer the patchwork elephant was under construction. "We've been enjoying the Elmer stories, but this has led us into Mondrian's style, and mathematical shapes – some of the children are now choosing to do patchwork... I think it is good to use artists like Mondrian where the children have to think about what the artist is trying to say, rather than someone like Constable where they can easily see – oh yes, that's a horse." Mondrian for three-year-olds? Why not.

One thing seems certain – the children from Coombes are going to have many vivid memories of school, thanks to the creativity and dynamism of Sue Humphries and her team.

As I prepared to leave, there was a big debate in the staff room about whether the flotilla of Moses baskets should be launched in the school pond, or floated in a large puddle outside the nursery. Sue was scurrying off to get her camera to record the event. I tried to pin her down to tell us about the awards the school has won. "Oh yes, but you don't want to mention them," she says. "A school is only as good as it is this minute. Nothing you've done in the past counts that much" ■



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