

Let Nature Feed Your Senses Billow Farm and Milestone school case study



Introduction

The Milestone School is a community Special School that provides for approximately 290 children with a wide range of special educational needs. Based in Gloucester the school offers education for a range of children with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

Billow farm is run by Simon and Hazel Pain. They have large areas of grassland and meadows encouraging biodiversity and wildlife. They also run a very successful equine business on the farm, housing many horses and offering different livery services. They have been running educational visits for a number of years and have developed the scope of visits through the first three years of Let Nature Feed Your Senses to include older people, groups with sensory impairments and special school students.

Having run several successful visits in the first part of the project they were natural partners to see how an ongoing relationship could develop. It was decided that the project could enable every student in Key stage 3 to visit the farm and receive a visit from Simon in their classroom at the school. Over the course of the visits they could test the resources we were creating and help input into onsite design changes to make the visits even more accessible.

What happened

A timetable of visits was set, Simon would go to the school often taking lambs with him, introduce himself and share with the students what his farm was like and the sorts of things they might do there. This allowed the students to become familiar with Simon, recognising his face and the way he communicates. Simon in turn could get an idea of each class, their abilities and which aspects of the farm would offer them the most stimulation and enjoyment. It was helpful for Simon to get an idea of the levels of communication he would be working with for each visit. Students within special schools have a wide range of abilities and communication methods, any idea of the levels you will be working with before the visits can be really helpful in making it a success.

Each class would then have at least one visit out to Billow farm. They would travel by minibus (that was supported by the project) and arrive mid morning. Visits would often start with a trailer ride around the farm. One of Simon's assistants would drive the tractor and Simon would travel in the back with the students. Simon would introduce different aspects of the farm as they went round, he would use it as



a sensory tour bringing out different objects relating to the spaces that the students could touch, smell and sometimes even taste!

There would be options to come off the trailer and use some of the resources from the discovery bags such as the nature palettes, magnifying glasses and bug boxes. Depending on the seasons, weather and class Simon could tailor the visits to ensure they were as enjoyable and easy as possible.

As the relationship between Simon and the school grew both sides could make suggestions about what the visits would be and how they could use the visits to strengthen any learning that was happening at the time. Simon was keen to understand what physical changes to the site would help the school to use the farm more easily.

An exchange of visits between the school and the farm really helped build the relationship between host and students.



This allowed the students to become familiar with Simon, recognising his face and the way he communicates. Simon in turn could get an idea of each class, their abilities and which aspects of the farm would offer them the most stimulation and enjoyment.



Research process

When we visited Milestone to set up the action research programme it became clear that they were eager to try many of the resources we had been developing and see if any could be adapted to fit with particular groups. Several of the classes involved were already using Widgit (symbol set) and were enthusiastic to try what we had developed and see what we could suggest for extending the visit.

We were keen to see what could be used to extend the learning either side of the visit, especially for children who needed more of an introduction to where they were going and what they might do when they got there. For some, new experiences can be daunting, without some kind of lead in to a new event levels of anxiety may increase. We extended some of our previous resources to cover **the build up to a visit including; things they might take with them, things they might need to wear, how they will get there. We also developed an introduction to the farm** designed to familiarise students with the farm environment. This encompassed different types of learning and helped build confidence about taking part in the visit. It was also helpful to repeat the activity following the visit helping the students remember what they had done, where they had been, what they had learnt about etc. It was interesting to discover what had stuck with the students during their visits. Animals as always, proved popular, the farm is home to many horses and often a visit will end with a trip round the stables. Being able to get up close to lots of horses was a unique and memorable experience.



The school was given a range of resources to try out back in the classroom following their visits. The classes who were familiar with Widgit tried the Widgit resources and found they were helpful in extending the learning. Some of the more able classes were happy to read some text and do small amounts of writing. We created some feedback activities for the students to share thoughts on different experiences. For those with fewer communication skills the activities would act as reminiscence tools.

The Sensory barn has been really useful to provide the students with a large covered space either providing shade in the summer or shelter from the rain. So far it has not been fully fitted out and the staff and students were keen to input ideas on how it could be used. Flexible seating and tables for activities and eating would be useful. **Simon hopes to have more resources in the barn so he can be responsive to the needs of a group or a change in the weather.**



Findings

Physical site changes

Between the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project visits and the action research visits, Simon made several physical improvements to the farm. Having run visits with groups with disabilities it was clear that some physical changes would be beneficial to help visits run more smoothly. This was a continuing theme throughout the action research year with Simon learning from the staff and students as to how he can best accommodate their needs. Although Simon had made improvements to the toilet facilities there is still a need to try and create a full changing places facility. By having something in place at the farm the visits could be made longer and allow a wide range of students to visit. Possible funding sources have been discussed and Simon is hoping to identify a building onsite that could house such a facility.

There are plans to further develop the accessible paths around the beginning of the site supporting access to the animals, sensory barn and play equipment. The students from Milestone use a wide range of walkers, power chairs and wheelchairs which can need wider paths than the standard path widths, especially if staff need to assist alongside. The staff shared how enjoyable it is to be somewhere outside of school where their students could go round paths and access points of interest unsupported. This is **incredibly important for their confidence and helping lead towards important life skills of being able to get around in the environment**. It is hoped that the path networks can be extended even further.



Readymade resources

A big piece of learning that came out of the relationship was the value in having prepared resources for the teachers to use at the farm, in the build up to a visit and after a visit. **The staff spoke about how they are always very busy and find it challenging to produce enough high quality resources for all of their students.** Having things to use or download on demand makes the project much more meaningful with deeper learning outcomes. When there is a range resources available, from the very sensory through to the more traditional learning it allows the staff to work on the same subject matter with a mix of abilities.

The development of resources can be hugely time consuming and there is often just not enough time in the staff timetable to produce the quality of resource they would like.



Connections between learning and a place

It was clear from the staff that they understand anything can be taught through the outdoors. Over the course of the year they used the farm visits to support ongoing learning programmes that the school was running. They looked at animals and where animals live, including what they eat. They also looked at habitat, it was far easier for the students to comprehend creatures living in a pond when they could use pictures of the pond at Simon's farm. Remembering what it was like to look at the pond and see the wildlife buzzing around reinforced the learning.

Using actual photographs of the places they had visited around the farm rather than imagined spaces made a real difference to their comprehension. Photographs have proved incredibly useful for the groups to look back over when reminiscing about visits and extending learning. For some students they have also acted as touchstones to take them back to the emotions and feelings of the days. The staff have put together collections of photographs to look through, and placed pictures on the walls of classrooms. These can be looked at by the students and have been used as a calming influence to take them back to the emotional state of the day, a very positive and useful tool for the staff.

Simon has a very impressive bug hotel on his site, it is often described as a bug skyscraper rather than a hotel. Simon wanted a sign that could support the hotel and encourage visitors to look out for all the creatures that might live in the hotel. We discussed the sign and how we could make a symbol version of the sign and some accompanying resources that would be recognisable to the Milestone students. When we looked at the sign it made sense to use Widgit symbols rather than just text. The sign became a focal point and would help visitors to learn about the hotel guests! It has also proved a connector; the students from Milestone are used to seeing Widgit within their own environment, to visit a place that also has Widgits makes them feel welcome and supported. The farm is showing that it communicates in a way that is sympathetic to the student's needs.

Anything can be taught through the outdoors

Farm visits supported ongoing learning programmes that were running at the school

Benefits of using photographs of the farm that the students were familiar with

Touchstones - Linking the students back to the emotions and feelings they had when visiting the farm

Widgit - Great at making the students feel welcome and supported

Communicating in a sympathetic, yet inclusive way

Great to have 'resources readymade for us'

'Makes a big difference for the students to see something like Widgit used outside of their school environment'

Can you find any bugs?

Where do



woodlouse



beetle



Can you



find



any bugs?



Under



Where do



we



live?



woodlouse



fly



mice



slug



centipede



worm



beetle



bee



ladybird



spider



snail



ant



Under



logs?



Flat



stones?



Bug



hotel?

Bringing the farm to the classroom

By Simon visiting the school first it helped prepare the students for the visit. Some of the Autistic students spent time looking at pictures of the farm to get familiar with where they would be going. By meeting Simon in person and some of his animals (he took lambs into the school due to the time of year) they could familiarise themselves, decreasing the risk of anxiety on the visit.

The lambs also had an effect on some of the more boisterous students. Several of the older boys at Milestone have issues with not knowing their own strength and using it inappropriately in school. The staff found that when these students were with the animals, especially the baby animals, they became very gentle and calm. So much so that they would tell other students to be careful when feeding the lambs or holding them.

The school were supported to go on visits throughout the year but the visits still only made up a small part of the term. It was important therefore to look at how the farm could be brought back to the classroom to keep the momentum going. The resources were really helpful for this but we were keen to explore more ways of keeping the relationship going, possibly developing projects in the school supported by Simon.

We developed a giant sound map specifically for Milestone as they needed a group resource that used large symbols and could be used repeatedly.

Using the sound map on the farm and then back in the school setting was great to begin comparing different sound landscapes. We used Velcro on the giant sound map as it is very tough and reusable, it is also a familiar material for special schools. The map was really popular and not only used on the farm and school but they also took it to other greenspaces. Sound was a sense that had not been focused on in this way, it was a positive activity for the students, stopping and listening is not something that they had really done before.



Decreasing the risk of anxiety on the visit



The staff felt this was a very powerful learning and by giving them responsibility with something precious they would really prove how gentle and caring they could be, helping them to get an idea of their own strength, grip and pressure and how you should touch and handle things that are more delicate.



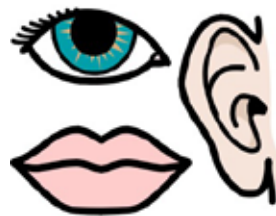
Sound map: visually mapping sounds in a set environment

The power of Velcro! Flexible, reusable, great!

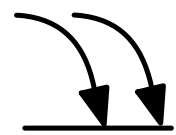
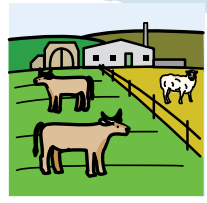
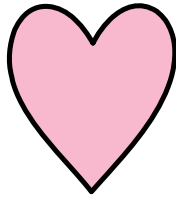
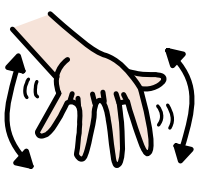
Inclusive research techniques

Many of the resources we prepared **allowed us to get an insight into how the students felt about their visits, the sorts of things that captured their imagination and interest.** Often we were working on a very sensory level so techniques such as 'throw and tell' or 'sensory throw and tell' proved most useful. For the group it would not be appropriate to hope for any detailed feedback about their visits. What we could glean from their responses was their main interests, even if it was a facial expression responding to a texture, smell or sight so a lot of the data collecting was more incidental and anecdotal from the staff.

We put together a small set of questions that could be answered by the more able students. The questions were available as an interactive PDF that could be used on a touch screen tablet, on a computer in school following the visits or as a printed paper version. The final question was simply 'Would you like to visit a farm again?', by asking this we felt confident the answer would tell us whether the visit had peaked their interest enough to want to do it again and therefore there had been a level of enjoyment.



We had hoped that the students would do some personal meaning mapping to give us an idea of the impact of the visit on their learning. Unfortunately the staff did not feel it was something they could do with their students. We think it is a really useful way of seeing the progression of understanding from before they visit to their understanding of what a farm is all about following a visit. If we were able to repeat the visit with the next Key Stage 4 students I would highly recommend they do PMM to get an idea of what the students are learning and noticing.



Would you like to visit a farm again?

Conclusion

The relationship between Milestone school and Billow farm has really flourished over the last year. Having the students regularly visit has enabled Simon and Hazel to see exactly how their site is used and how it could be improved to support people with complex needs. From the physicality of the site, the information onsite, how they communicate and how the visit is supported before and after.

It will be important to look for financial ways to support the continued relationship between the school and the farm. The main issue for the school is the transport cost in getting to and from the farm. Classes typically have one supported trip per term.

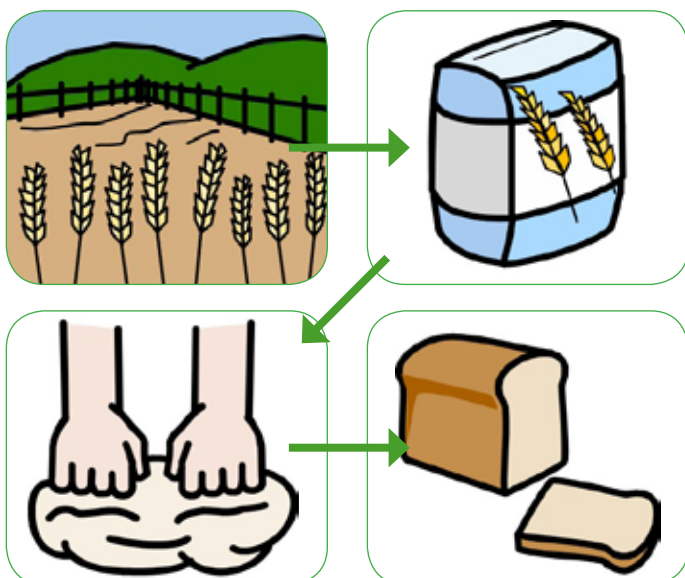
The farm is very keen to improve their facilities for people with complex needs. They would like to put in a changing places facility allowing full adult changing and an accessible toilet, possibly even shower on the site. They would also like to create a facility for cooking with people with complex needs. They grow organic wheat on the site and have done various bread making workshops, so far these can only be done with small groups and unfortunately the space they use cannot currently accommodate large wheelchairs. Simon and Hazel believe strongly in how demonstrating the journey from crop to product really provides a deep level of understanding, if you can do this through a sensory method then it is likely to be even more memorable.

A suite of resources that could be developed for the school to use each year would help reduce the pressure on the teachers. They would be keen to continue using the ones we have already created and look at how they could be further developed to work alongside other curriculum subjects they will cover.

It would also be beneficial to see whether some kind of programme of work could be established between the school and the farm. When some students visited they were keen to do very practical activities. Milestone school are keen to help develop life skills and see how their students will be part of society after their school life, in order to achieve this it is important to work on life skills during their school life. It could be that some of the practical tasks on the farm could be carried out on visits and then transferred back to activity in the school.

It is often difficult for special schools to find places that will welcome their students, stimulate them and assist in what they are currently learning.

Simon and Hazel have done this at Billow farm with amazing results. They will continue to improve the way they do this. It would be a shame for the relationship to stop as it has been so beneficial for all involved. If money can be found for transport, site improvements and resource creation there is no reason why this relationship cannot continue to flourish for years to come.



'Having a site to yourself. No one staring, you can take your time, freedom to roam, not getting in anyones way. Really makes a difference to our students, we love coming here.'



Let Nature Feed Your Senses is a partnership between Sensory Trust and LEAF, supported by Natural England's Big Lottery funded Access to Nature programme. For more information www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org

