

# Designing with Children

## Ballifield Primary School

The Ballifield Community Primary School project was established in the context of the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) 'Classrooms for the Future' programme, piloting 27 new primary schools around the country. This was a governmental large-scale investment scheme launched in 2000 with the aim to rebuild, refurbish or upgrade primary schools and offer 21st century learning environments. In this light, a series of projects took place around the country exploring what a 21st century classroom should be like. Two new classrooms were thus built at Ballifield Community Primary School in Sheffield: a result of the collaborative partnerships between the Bureau of Design Research (B+DR), The University of Sheffield, the Local Education Authority, teachers and pupils. As part of the project, Architecture students from the University of Sheffield worked with the children to address parts of the existing school and its grounds. This followed the two-fold agenda of the Sheffield LEA, i.e. to build the classrooms at an affordable cost and to investigate more generic, possibly prototypical, solutions with regards to the school environment (Chiles 2003). As a result, the design team looked at both interior spaces, such as toilets and entrance, as well as the school grounds for the design of a shelter and seating area.

### Motivation

The programme 'Classrooms for the Future' went in line with the 'Every Child Matters' agenda in seeing primary schools playing an active role in their communities through offer of extended services to the parents, pupils and the broader community. In design terms, and specifically for Ballifield Community Primary School, the aim was to solve the entrance and access problems of the school and create a new image in the eyes of the children and the community. Moreover, according to Prue Chiles, one of the architects engaged in this process, a key goal has also been to encourage children to express their needs and wishes for their classroom and outdoor school environments through hands-on engagement (Chiles

### What

Primary school grounds and indoor spaces design

### Where

Sheffield, United Kingdom

### Age

5-10

### Group Size

Whole school

### Project Stage

Brief, Design Development

### Children's Roles

Creative Inspirers, Expert Consultants, Placemakers

### Timescale

November 2006 - June 2009

### Partners

Prue Chiles and Howard Evans, Prue Chiles Architects (Architects)  
Bureau of Design Research, School of Architecture, The University of Sheffield (Design)  
Postgraduate diploma students, School of Architecture, Sheffield University (Design and engagement)  
Sheffield Local Education Authority (Funder)  
Ballifield Primary School staff and pupils (Participants)

2003).

## Children's involvement

The Ballifield pupil team was involved in the brief and design stage of the project. Before the design stages of the project a programme of consultation was carried out, undertaken by the architects with Year 4 and 5 students from Sheffield University. This formed a six week 'live project', the intention of which was to make this consultation process part of the briefing for the classrooms. The workshops implemented in this context involved an introductory session through use of cartoon strips to introduce the job of the architect and flash cards showing images. Using slides, the students and the children then looked in more detail the built environment and inspirational school buildings. These workshops unfolded through four sessions, and the children modelled an ideal classroom, surveyed favourite places and places to avoid and answered questions. Drawing and keeping notes was encouraged throughout, thus prompting children to be expressive. Other related activities in this context were the following:

- use of descriptive words mounted on cards (e.g. warm, sad, calm, heavy) to describe their experiences of their school environment. Children stuck these directly on different parts of the building, thus expressing their feelings about these places. Children then talked through their chosen cards and shared their views of their school with the facilitators involved;
- the pupils were also involved in tours around the school building and showed adults the most interesting parts of their classrooms. This exercise was transformed into a game for the pupils: a time limit was placed so that their tour became a focused and competitive activity. The pupils involved tied one coloured balloon at their favourite place and another colour at their least favourite. The football area, for example, was favoured by the boys at the school, however the girls did not seem to share this view. This led to the decision to design an outdoor seating area. As for the least favourite place, this was unanimously the school toilets, which subsequently led to the second project;
- simple format questionnaires were handed out by the school teacher as homework, asking the pupils to think about what could make their classrooms better places;
- children discussed with their teachers the problems related to the toilet area and identified possible solutions. This was followed by drawings to help develop the toilet designs. Word games were also used by the students to elicit ideas about the toilet design; and
- a detailed workshop was carried out at the school entrance with 5 year-olds. They were asked to imagine what they would like to see upon entrance, and their ideas were captured through collages, paintings and models.

These activities were then followed by the playground shelter and seats project. Year 4 pupils took part in a modelling workshop organised by Architecture students with the aim of exploring ideas for a playground shelter using materials like sticks, paper and plaster. These ideas informed the design and construction of the shelter and seating area, while the children learned about the use of shelters, construction and structure. A more detailed mapping exercise of the school grounds helped to establish exactly where children would like the new seating area and shelter. Rather than only being asked, they were engaged in an exercise that mapped current patterns of use, e.g. using different colour balloons to represent areas of play. Designs for the shelter were then developed by University students

in collaboration with the headteacher.

Finally, a stepping stone project transformed a piece of grass outside the new classrooms: a path of stepping stones with pupils' handprints created a permanent marker for the children involved in the project. Each stone was marked with the class name and two children of each class left their handprints on the stones.

## Outputs and outcomes

Two classrooms were built replacing run-down mobile units and placed at the front entrance to the school; cloakrooms and toilets were revamped; a seating area and shelter were created at the football playground; stepping stones were laid with pupils' handprints; and the book, *Primary Ideas* was written, informed by this and other similar projects. A range of learning benefits were reported for the children involved by means of different focused activities. Pupils learnt about their school's built environment and started making informed decisions about their school, pointing to possible solutions and offering ideas about how best to transform and use their classrooms. Such learning, however, was a two-way process: through this series of sessions, the designers involved found out about how children feel about and experience their everyday school environment. It encouraged designers and teachers alike to think about ways in which such small projects can help them plan for larger future projects, having a better understanding of dealing with local education authorities and other statutory bodies.

The Bureau Design Research design team, and authors of the book *Primary Ideas*, believe that the project '*brought to light a whole host of possibilities to improve and enhance other parts of the school's buildings and to think about neglected areas and plan small projects that can be achieved in a short term*' (Care and Chiles 2006: preface).

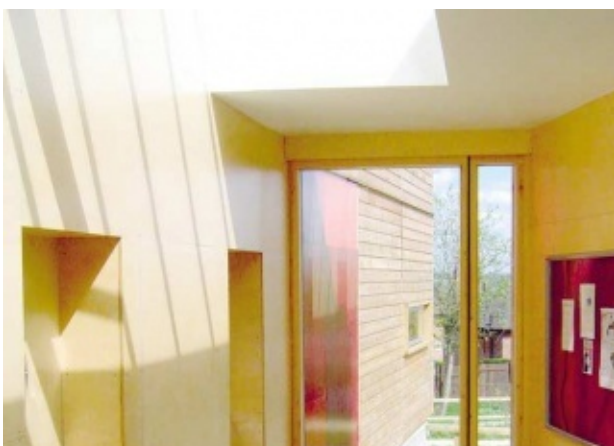
## Resources

Bureau Design Research <http://www.bdr.group.shef.ac.uk/> (accessed 16 December 2013)

Care, L. and Chiles, P. (2006) *Primary Ideas. Projects to enhance primary school developments*. London: DfES.

Chiles, P. (2003) 'Classrooms for the Future: an adventure in design and research', *Architectural Research Quarterly - ARQ*, vol.7, nos. 3/4, 244-261.

Personal communication with Leo Care (15 April 2013).





*A place to sit and look out from – outside the classrooms at Ballifield Community Primary School "Classroom of the Future". Courtesy: Prue Chiles (photographer: Leo Care and Prue Chiles)*



*Pupils using plaster in model making activity. Ballifield Community Primary School, Sheffield. Courtesy: Prue Chiles (photographer: Leo Care, Prue Chiles)*



*Outdoor shelter and seating area at Ballifield Community Primary School, Sheffield. Courtesy: Prue Chiles (photographer: Leo Care, Prue Chiles)*