

Designing with Children

Queen Elizabeth's School BSF

Queen Elizabeth's School is a large Church of England secondary school in the Dorset countryside. In 2005 it was announced that Dorset County Council was allocated funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to rebuild one secondary school under the national design programme Building Schools for the Future (BSF). Two key aspirations through this larger building project were to (a) actively embrace the school community in the transformation process and (b) raise the educational agenda throughout Dorset. It is in this light that the County Council decided to actively involve the students in the design process.

Motivation

The school's agenda for student involvement went hand-in-hand with the overall participatory school culture, although the primary focus was educational and related to the pedagogical transformation of the school. In this light, the students focused on the specific areas of activity (particularly sustainability and ecology) thus ensuring links with the curriculum teaching and learning. Designing a fit-for-purpose environment that meets the quality and academic achievement standards of the school was another key priority for the Queen Elizabeth's School community. Finally, student involvement was seen as an opportunity to stimulate students and enable them to develop their creative potential.

Children's involvement

According to the school Business Manager back in 2007, the school aspired to engage the whole student community in the design process. To some extent this was achieved thanks to successful organisation of activities, communication and dissemination (through, for example, surveys, presentations, visits to inspirational sites, Design Festivals etc.). The core student design team, however, comprised smaller, focused groups. This allowed some degree of monitoring by the designated members of staff. A whole range of adults were involved in supporting the students' involvement in some way, including: the Headteacher, Business Manager, 14 teachers, the Local Authority (LA) Education Officer, BSF Manager, Landscape

What

Rebuilding Queen Elizabeth's School

Where

Wimborne, Dorset, United Kingdom

Age

13-18

Group Size

Whole school involvement and smaller design groups

Project Stage

Brief, Concept, Design Development

Children's Roles

Clients, Trailblazers

Timescale

2006–to date

Partners

Feilden Clegg Bradley (Architects)
Mouchel Parkman (Landscape architect)
Carillion, later Alfred McAlpine (Construction)
Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (Funder)
Dorset County Council (Initiator)
Queen Elizabeth School students and staff (Participants)

Architect and representatives from the construction firm. The Business Manager and the LA Education Officer were the key individuals overseeing the student involvement process, while designated members of staff coordinated the student activities and initiatives.

Students were involved in the design process of their new school at the early stages of the design in 2007. They formed ongoing student shadow groups that researched and followed different thematic aspects of the design and build process: sustainability, landscape and ecology, spaces and places, art, construction and publicity and dissemination. In this context, the student groups conducted small-scale projects and initiated activities to involve the broader school community. Although the majority of the thematic areas had direct links with curriculum delivery, others were extra-curricular. Student involvement was seen in the following design process-related 'phases': strategising, recruiting, co-designing, reviewing, updating, inspiring, informing, connecting, documenting, realising, fundraising and celebrating. These unfolded through the activities outlined below:

- organisation and participation in three Design Festival Days, supported by external facilitators (Schoolworks) and involving the whole of the student population;
- workshop/feedback session with project architect: power-point presentations by the sustainability group; feedback session with the appointed BSF designer; discussions with the BSF designer and school staff about areas of improvement through the BSF (i.e. identity);
- visits to sites for inspiration and research (e.g. the Eden project in Cornwall);
- landscape and Ecology group taking on the role of the 'client': the group interviewed landscape architects for the commission of the school's Science Gardens project development;
- contribution to the nearby new Sustainability Centre with the school recycling initiative: construction of bird-boxes, fashion show using recycled materials, design of a bio-diesel generator etc;
- Eco-Schools award day;
- assemblies and events around sustainability and ecology organised by core student participants for other students, intended to develop and support new practices for the new school; and
- a sustainability website set up by the sustainability group: the group conducted a survey about bike lockers and designed a quiz on sustainability.

The main student roles were trailblazers and clients. The students also identified themselves as Questioners, Enthusiasts, Giggles, Fundraisers, Communicators, Creative inspirers, Evaluators, Controllers, Learners and Decision-makers.

Outputs and outcomes

These were wide-ranging, from a report highlighting the students' priorities and ideas for their school, based on the design festival, to student power-point presentations for feedback sessions, to the science garden in the school grounds. The recycling scheme organised by the sustainability team led to competitions that involved the construction of bird-boxes, a

fashion show using recycled materials and the construction of a bio-diesel generator. The sustainability group also set up a website hosting information on sustainability issues, designed a quiz for sustainability and conducted a survey involving the whole student community on bike-lockers. This group's activities ultimately contributed to a change in school practices and an awareness that would inform the use and management of the new school.

Students felt that their involvement was valuable to add to their CVs in that they made contacts and developed confidence, organisation skills and 'life' skills (communication, presentation) through a lot of hard work. They also had fun and developed a sense of power and influence, noting for example, where they gave feedback and ideas in meetings with the designer/design team and later saw what they felt was a direct response in design drawings.

School staff felt overwhelmed with workload and, though excited, they were sometimes sceptical about the outcomes. They found that the students' involvement allowed students to 'shine', to develop confidence and demonstrate maturity and professionalism. The majority thought that the opportunity to be involved in the design process of their school was once in a lifetime. They had the chance to meet with other professionals, make links with businesses and agencies outside the school and strengthen their relationship with their colleagues and students.

The architect interviewed thought that he developed a better understanding of the complexity and constraints in the planning and implementation of such a large-scale and demanding process, but also a sense of purpose and persistence to overcome the obstacles.

The Local Authority officer involved saw this as a wonderful opportunity to engage with children in their work. This collaboration framework helped to break down assumptions about children's input and capacities.

Some acknowledged factors in success included:

- efficient and driven Local Authority liaison with designated space at the school;
- a group of willing and committed teachers as facilitators/coordinators;
- existing participatory ethos and strong sense of community belonging. A sense of ownership of the various initiatives led to an ongoing participation within the school;
- positive climate of relationships between students and staff; committed and enthusiastic leadership team;
- smooth communication/sharing/giving and receiving feedback; no blame culture; and
- listening culture, inspiration and flexibility on the part of the designers and planners.

At the same time, the following barriers and suggestions for more effective participation were identified:

- delays in the building process prevented from planned vocational learning activities;

- main design already decided – involvement activities focused on sub-projects;
- hard to involve the whole school community – issue of representation;
- need to have more hands-on activities;
- more information and clarity about roles from the outset; and
- careful expectations management

Quotes

'We committed ourselves to involving the student body as far as possible and determined very early on that we would also have groups of students shadow the main activities of the project team. These would be groups who would shadow the construction, the main core group [...] We believe we are committed to listening to the student voice and we wanted to use this as a project to demonstrate that we did just that [...]' (School business manager).

'It's the students that have to have an input, so you're there really to give them the opportunity to do that in a managed way' (Members of staff).

'They have an opinion and their opinion counts' (Members of staff).

'The project manager has enough trouble to keep all these people together but the architects have to initiate I think the mental process' (Architect).

'Some of the time our students made us feel quite humbled; they really surprised us with the qualities and the confidence that they actually got to do this. I think this project enables those students really to shine' (Teacher).

Resources

Dorset for you Queen Elizabeth's School 'Wimborne, redevelopment'

<http://www.dorsetforyou.com/408838> (accessed 10 April 2013)

Parnell, R. 'School design involvement. Case studies: A summary of findings' Available in:

<http://rosieparnell.staff.shef.ac.uk/DSIU/findings/case%20study%20findings.pdf> (accessed 10 April 2013)

Queen Elizabeth's School, Sustainability Group. <http://www.qesustainabilitygroup.org.uk/> (accessed 10 April 2013).

Note: Much of the information on this project has been collected in the research context of the three-year project *Designing New Schools: putting people at the heart of the process* (October 2006 – April 2010), School of Architecture, University of Sheffield. The project was funded by the Engineering and Physical Research Council (EPSRC) and explored the involvement of the school community in the school design process in the context of the BSF (Building Schools for the Future). Queen Elizabeth's School was one of the four case studies explored in this context.





The new Sustainability Education Centre at Queen Elizabeth's School. Courtesy: Kevin Brougham (photographer: Timothy John)



Students' Ecology Board. Courtesy: Kevin Brougham (photographer Maria Patsarika)



Plan for a new eco-school. Queen Elizabeth's School. Courtesy: Kevin Brougham