

Making Connections at Grantown Grammar School

Making Connections is an interdisciplinary programme encompassing themes of global citizenship, sustainability, international education and enterprise linked to practical outdoor learning experiences within the Cairngorms National Park.



A case study to give ideas and inspiration for whole school approaches to outdoor learning.

Introduction

Grantown Grammar School is located in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park, an area of special beauty, landscape, wildlife and culture. This unique environment and the opportunities for learning it provides have inspired staff from a number of faculties to develop a progressive, interdisciplinary programme of learning incorporating themes including global citizenship, sustainability, international education and enterprise. Support has been given by partners from Cairngorms National Park, John Muir Award (JMA), RSPB, Highland Ranger Service, Skills Development Scotland, Ballindalloch Wind Farm and the Glenlivet Estate,

The themes are studied through a series of “summit challenges” within which pupils are provided with disciplinary and interdisciplinary content to give starting points for tasks that have flexibility and options for personalisation and choice for the pupils in terms of exploration, delivery and assessment. The topics are studied at an international, national and local scale. Local links are made through outdoor learning opportunities within the context of the JMA.

All S1 and S2 pupils, approximately 160 in total take part in the Making Connections programme which runs throughout the year.



Planning

Making Connections began in 2007 and has been adapted each year according to pupil and staff feedback. The initial focus was on developing global citizens, sustainable development education, enterprise and the four capacities. In 2008 the remit was extended to include an outdoor learning element through partnership

working with the JMA and the Physical Education / Outdoor Learning department. This was in response to a realisation that many of the pupils had little involvement or understanding of the unique natural environment around the school.

Members of the team attended the Highland Co-operative learning academy and co-operative learning strategies were embedded to support the pupils in working with others.

In 2009, Skills Development Scotland became involved to support incorporation of Career Management Skills within the programme to help pupils develop skills for their future life and work alongside the academic learning.

Last year the pupils began to create e-portfolios to record evidence of their achievements and a more structured self assessment approach was adopted in which the pupils answer a questionnaire about their knowledge, understanding and attitudes towards citizenship, sustainability and the outdoors at the start of the programme. They repeat the exercise at the end of S1 and input ideas into planning for the following year. At the end of S2 the questionnaire will be carried out again and progress evaluated.

The project aims to engage pupils with real life current issues, such as the impact of resource dependency and peak oil, sources of sustainable energy, fair trade, community links, conflict, carbon reduction, conservation and sustainable use of the local environment. Through learning about these issues combined with practical action and sharing experiences, it is hoped that pupils will connect with the local and global environment and understand their place in the communities around them, resulting in real, sustained development of the four capacities.



Implementation

The Making Connections programme runs twice weekly for a double period on a Tuesday and a single period on a Thursday throughout the year. Pupils take part in activities on a rotational basis. During the Tuesday session pupils are involved with specific disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning related to one of the topic themes. The course modules are content rich at the beginning, becoming more pupil and skills driven as they progress with the pupils working together to apply and synthesise what they have learned in new contexts. This may be through an indoor challenge based activity or through the outdoor learning element of the programme. On Thursdays the pupils focus on building trust within their groups and developing social, presentation and study skills which support them in achieving the co-operative academic tasks. During this session, they also spend time reflecting on, evaluating and planning their learning as they work on their e-portfolio.

Incorporation of the JMA as a structure for the outdoor learning elements of the programme helps to broaden the experiences the children have in the outdoors. The emphasis is not just on the activities but through encouraging the pupils to connect with the wild places they are in, links are made with the local outdoor area and the themes of citizenship, sustainability and enterprise that are the focus for the in school sessions.

The JMA also supports progression as the S1 pupils work towards gaining their discovery award whilst the S2 pupils work at the more advanced level of the explorer award. At each level of the JMA participants are required to discover, explore and conserve a wild place and then share what they have learned and done. The adventurous activities lead by the PE department, including orienteering, mountain biking, hill walking, canoeing and skiing serve as a vehicle for the pupils to explore and journey through wild places. The pupils also go out with local rangers and environmental organisations such as RSPB to carry out practical conservation tasks and share their experiences through making connections activities in school.



Impacts

Until this year the impact of the project has been evaluated through observation, anecdotal evidence and informal pupil feedback. This year the questionnaires and e-portfolios have been introduced and will provide more structured evaluations. Over the past three years many positive impacts have been evident.

- The cross curricular nature of the project has promoted interfaculty working and supported the implementation of joined up teaching and learning required by curriculum for excellence.
- The cross curricular links, real life examples and local outdoor learning experiences have created a meaningful context for learning and assessment of a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding.
- The programme has been particularly useful in helping pupils engage with areas of learning that are the responsibility of all. Literacy is supported through opportunities for talking and listening in groups, developing presentation skills and through writing for different purposes. Numeracy is developed through application of core skills in practical tasks both indoors and out. Working in the outdoors particularly, pupils are required to transfer mathematical skills into a new context and this is a great opportunity for assessment. Through outdoor learning, pupils experience the many associated benefits for mental, emotional and physical health and the health and wellbeing outcomes are further addressed by developing social skills through co-operative learning.



- The structure of Making Connections has allowed outdoor education and JMA to move from stand alone projects into an integrated programme allowing the aims and philosophy of JMA and outdoor learning to become a core foundation of the S1 - S2 curriculum.
- All S1 pupils achieve JMA discovery level award and all S2 pupils gain the explorer award, providing external recognition of their achievements.
- Pupils have a positive attitude to learning. They are motivated by the variety of activities, styles of learning, choice, challenge and opportunities for creativity.
- Pupils appear to have an increased sense of place within the Cairngorms National Park and demonstrate a greater connection to the communities they are part of.
- Through outdoor learning, links are made between global and national issues studied in school and the local context.
- Pupils develop skills in a variety of outdoor activities which open up new ways of experiencing their local environment.
- Pupils learn about responsible access and have opportunities to assess and manage risk in the outdoors.

- Pupils develop the ability to contribute to building a better world by taking responsible, ethical actions to improve their lives, the lives of others and the environment.

Next steps

- Continue to build on prior learning of new S1 pupils. Many pupils have had experience of JMA or Forest School type activities during primary school.
- Increase links from across the curriculum to outdoor learning out with Making Connections, initially by getting teachers from a variety of subjects to team-teach outdoors as part of the JMA.
- Keep giving staff the opportunity to lead different projects, in order to allow a wider range of specialisms to adapt and improve projects, and thereby create new ones.
- Re-address on-hold projects, such as Olympics, money and space, when it is timely.
- Further develop the e-portfolio.
- Evaluate the pupil questionnaires and feed results into future developments.
- Continue to provide opportunities for older pupils to progress to the JMA Junior Ranger Programme.
- Keep working towards the long term goal of personal attitude change leading to positive action.

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