

School garden

The project began its work at one school with some group discussions with all of the students in the school's Life Skills Unit. These discussions were designed to give the young people 'a voice' about what was important to them. Initially this was quite a new experience for many of the young people, but quickly developed to become part of their regular way of working. The young people were soon able to identify many common ideas about the positive and the not so positive aspects of their school life. Eventually they decided, as a group, on one major focus for change in their school: with the support of our project, they wanted to create an outdoor social space for use by the students in the unit.

They set about clarifying exactly what it was they wanted and why. In the early stages, the staff closely supported the young people as they learnt about 'taking the lead'. The young people developed new skills in saying what they thought and skills for working together, planning and negotiating to make the best decisions.

They made lots of new partnerships for their project work. Early on, they enlisted the co-operation of the school's Site Manager and the Facilities Bursar to help them turn their ideas into reality. Soon, with this kind of support, the young people's ideas and designs were transformed into formal plans using information technologies. The young people developed these plans in earnest – identifying what was important about their new area for them. They decided what would be in the area (like seating for people eating packed lunches and a very important area of decking for al fresco dancing).

Working on these plans usefully provided some very practical and meaningful contexts for developing literacy and numeracy skills. Other subject areas were also addressed – some in very creative ways – especially French and art. The students used their mathematics lessons in order to produce calculations in support of their designs and to cost each aspect, making decisions about what they could afford based on their limited budget. They assigned project roles within the group, building on the strengths and the interests of individuals.

Their collaboration with others grew as the project developed. The students wrote to a local garden centre. The manager generously offered them manpower and plants for their project and the students worked alongside the gardeners to plant up their area. Parents and governors helped them to make a visual record of their developments in an album using some very creative new techniques.

As the project work developed and interest across the school grew, the students from the unit gained respect from the rest of the school – from both their mainstream peers and from staff. Some mainstream students acted as learning mentors to some of the young people, offering peer support for aspects of the project that required specialist skills. The unit held a morning

celebration to open their garden area officially. They invited the headteacher, local business people, parents and the district councillor. Following all of this, the young people told us about feeling more included; they now held a profile both within their school and out in the local community. They were featured in the school magazine and the local paper. They were proud of their achievements and keenly aware of the esteem in which they were held by others.