An independent review about The Learning Naturally Method at Beddington Infant School

DR FIONA AUBREY-SMITH
EDD MA(ED) MMUS PGCE BA(HONS) FCCT FRSA FHEA

September 2025

Contents

Aim

The purpose of this report is to articulate Beddington Infant School's pedagogical approach and its underpinning rationale.

This report does not seek to duplicate insights from the many inspection reports, accountability frameworks, performance indicators and stakeholder feedback which each articulate the significant success of the Beddington approach to supporting learning. Instead, this report is intended to complement existing surface-level summaries through deeper research insights; forensically examining the rationale and nuance underpinning everyday practice across the school.

Importantly, this report attempts to articulate *why* and *how* the Beddington approach translates a contemporary vision into practice.

Methodology

Data generation for this research took part September 2024 - January 2025, and consisted of research interviews and focus groups with Beddington's Headteacher, Deputy Headteacher, SENCO, teachers, teaching assistants and children. These sessions were used to surface beliefs, intentions, operational plans and reflections.

Triangulating those interviews, multiple research observations across a diverse range of learning spaces were used to probe into the lived experiences of children and adults.

Furthermore, a wide range of internal and public facing documents and data sources were used to triangulate findings and stimulate further discussion.

Context

In the context of this report, it is helpful to locate Beddington Infant School within the broader national landscape.

Beddington is a three form entry infant school, with 285 children aged 3-7 (Nursery through to Year 2) on roll as at January 2025. Beddington is a local authority maintained school, working alongside 7 other schools as part of the Sutton Education Trust. Located in outer London, the intake is mixed in terms of deprivation and ethnicity, although Pupil Premium is slightly lower than national average. Almost half of the children are summer born, and there are proportionally more boys than girls attending the school. Beddington's number of children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities aligns with national averages,[1] and the number of children speaking English as a second language is higher than the national average[2].

Last inspected by Ofsted in 2023, Beddington's inspection report begins with the bold phrase that, 'Pupils thrive here'[3] - a sentiment triangulated by 100% of parents commending the school for their child's good progress and great teaching provision in the most recent internal parent survey[4]. That holistic view was shared by Ofsted, who in 2023 identified

Rainy days are full of opportunities.

---

[1] https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/school/102983/beddington-infants%27-school/absence-and-pupil-population
[2] https://www.compare-school-performance.service.gov.uk/school/102983/beddington-infants%27-school/absence-and-pupil-population
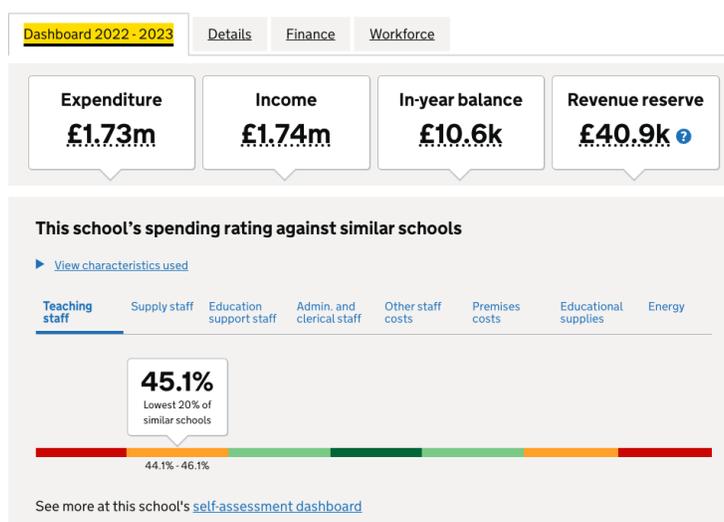[3] Ofsted (2023) Inspection of Beddington Infant School. https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50229464
[4] Beddington Infant School Parent Survey (July 2024), https://docs.google.com/document/d/117hVXHQe09pz-jccRC42YUnluxnt4UZUvamNKK5cM10/edit?tab=t.0#heading=h.gjdgxs

(through inspection) that Personal Development, Behaviour and Attitudes, and Early Years provision, were all graded as Outstanding. The overall Quality of Education, and Leadership and Management earned high praise for 'strong expertise and knowledge' amongst senior leaders, and staff commenting on how much they enjoy working at the school.

In 2024, children at Beddington Infant School achieved well above national averages for Reading, Writing and Maths both at Age Related Expectations (ARE), and for children working at Greater Depth. On average, over the last 3 years, Beddington children have outperformed national averages by 10-20% in Phonics, Reading, Writing and Maths[5].

As a local authority maintained school, Beddington operates under the same national policies, curricula[6], and frameworks as other state primary schools[7]. In 2023, Ofsted confirmed that *"The school curriculum meets the ambition of the national curriculum and the early years foundation stage profile"[8]*, - underpinning the point that children at Beddington benefit from the high expectations and ambition of national policies, whilst *simultaneously* benefiting from a deeper pedagogy which values each individual child[9].

Beddington also work within the same financial landscape as other

---

[5] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Beddington-Infants-School-Attainment-2019-2022-and-2023-compared-to-national.pdf

[6] DfE (2014) The National Curriculum in England: Key Stage 1 and 2 framework https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425601/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf and DfE (2024) Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2

[7] Gov (2024) Maintained Schools Governance Guidance https://www.gov.uk/guidance/governance-in-maintained-schools/statutory-policies-for-maintained-schools

[8] Ofsted (2023) Inspection of Beddington Infant School. https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50229464

[9] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/provision/teaching-learning/learning/

state primary schools[10], a national picture which is currently under significant pressure - with rising costs, falling birth rates and uncertain national budgeting decisions particularly affecting small schools with young cohorts of children. Based on DfE financial benchmarking data, Beddington's income is less than average when compared to similar schools[11], yet Beddington's expenditure is comparable with those same schools[12].
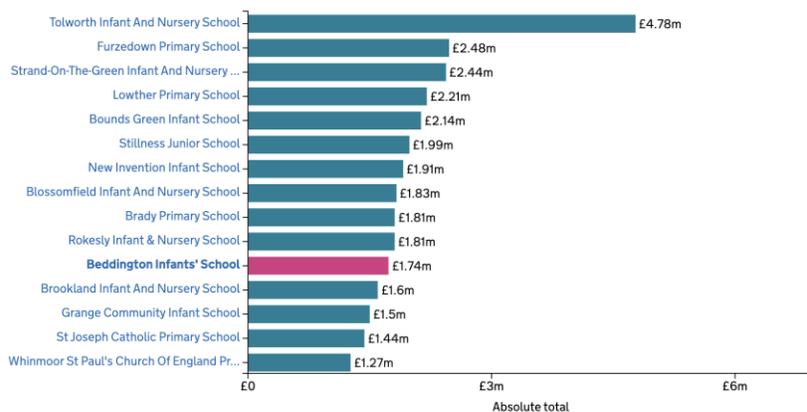
It is helpful too, to note the staffing at Beddington - with broadly similar costs for teachers and leaders to other schools, but a higher than average child to teacher ratio - the result of careful budget management and thoughtful approaches to staffing[13].

School characteristics

Assessment area	School data	Rating against thresholds	
Average teacher cost	£67,034.07	Broadly in line with similar schools	?
Senior leaders as a percentage of workforce	10.9%	Broadly in line with similar schools	?
Pupil to teacher ratio	24.57	Highest 20% of similar schools	?
Pupil to adult ratio	10.39	Broadly in line with similar schools	?
Teacher contact ratio (less than 1)		Not available. Add data	?
Predicted percentage pupil number change in 3-5 years		Not available. Add data	?
Average Class size		Not available. Add data	?

---

[10] Gov (2024) Local authority schools financial reporting and assurance
https://www.gov.uk/education/local-authority-schools-financial-reporting-and-assurance
[11] https://schools-financial-benchmarking.service.gov.uk/BenchmarkCharts#tabsSection
[12] https://schools-financial-benchmarking.service.gov.uk/BenchmarkCharts/GenerateFromSimpleCriteria?Urn=102983&EstType=Maintained&ComparisonType=Basic&SimpleCriteria.IncludeFsm=true&SimpleCriteria.IncludeSen=true&SimpleCriteria.IncludeEal=true#tabsSection
[13] https://schools-financial-benchmarking.service.gov.uk/BenchmarkCharts/GenerateFromSimpleCriteria?Urn=102983&EstType=Maintained&ComparisonType=Basic&SimpleCriteria.IncludeFsm=true&SimpleCriteria.IncludeSen=true&SimpleCriteria.IncludeEal=true#tabsSection

Collectively, these financial insights suggest a tightly managed school budget, despite challenging financial pressures. **It is notable therefore, that the context of this school is one of a high performing, and well managed organisation.**

Exploring number patterns

Background

Research evidence about effective pedagogy shows that there are many ways that educational excellence can be achieved, each stemming from a values and belief system about what it means to be a learner and to learn, what it means to be a teacher and to teach, views on the origins and context of knowledge, and views on the role of schooling in learner's wider lives.

In broad terms, there are 4 predominant pedagogical belief systems: Traditional Behaviourism, Individual Constructivism, Social Constructivism, and Sociocultural[14]. As human beings, we each hold belief systems (which we may or may not be consciously aware about, or able to articulate), which align with one of these aforementioned pedagogical belief systems. Generally, these beliefs are a direct result of an accumulation of our own prior experiences - stemming from our own

---

[14] For full definitions and further reading on these systems please refer to Chapter 4 of Aubrey-Smith, F., & Twining, P., (2024) *From EdTech to PedTech: Changing the wy we think about digital technology.* Routledge: London.

childhoods and early education, through later education and professional experiences, alongside influences from significant people and events. Notably, our beliefs tend to either replicate what we have internalised as positive, or react against what we have internalised as negative[15].

It is important to be aware that these belief systems exist in parallel and they are not hierarchical. However, our perceptions (which are based on our personal value systems) will lead us to feel - often quite strongly, that some belief systems are preferable over others. This cannot be true in absolute terms - but is a simple result of perceptions that we have based on our own individual life experiences. In short, if we perceive that a system worked well for us, we are more likely to value that system - even if it does not necessarily work for others. Similarly, if we perceive a system as having been ineffective for us, we are more likely to view it as ineffective, even if it is highly positively impactful for others.

---

[15] For further detail about how pedagogical belief systems emerge in each of us with associated recommended reading, please refer to Chapter 5 of Aubrey-Smith & Twining (2024) - 'The Funnels of Influence'

Current accountability and performance measures are aligned with particular pedagogical beliefs (largely pivoting around Individual Constructivism)[16], which require all schools to adopt particular pedagogical approaches (e.g. preparation for high stakes individual summative assessments), and this tends to lead to the adoption of particular pedagogical practices (e.g. curriculum content based age related year groupings). For example, these systems place value on individual acquisition of pre-determined knowledge rather than knowledge being socially evolved, and view performance as a metric based on the relationship between an individual (person or organisation) and its peers. There are a range of reasons for this stemming from political, economic and sociological influences[17].


Children naturally help each other

---

[16]See Aubrey-Smith, F., (2020) *An exploration of the relationship between classroom teacher's pedagogical beliefs, and their uses of technologies.* Doctoral thesis. https://oro.open.ac.uk/75001/

[17] See Brighouse, T., and Waters, M., *About our Schools: improving on previous best.* Crown House: London.

However, established research demonstrates that it is common practice across the sector for an organisation to utilise pedagogical approaches which may not necessarily be aligned with the personal pedagogical beliefs of the educators within it, but which professionally, enable them to conform to system expectations[18]. For example, studies suggest that in 2024, approximately two thirds of teachers and leaders beliefs align with socially oriented models of learning (i.e. where learning itself is shaped through the process of socialising it), yet all of these colleagues are consciously enacting teaching and learning strategies which emphasise the individual nature of learning (e.g. learning largely recorded in individual exercise books)[19]. There are pragmatic reasons for this, which largely stem from a high stakes accountability system (e.g. tangible evidence to demonstrate for those conducting monitoring and inspection visits, and preparation for individual high stakes summative tests and exams).
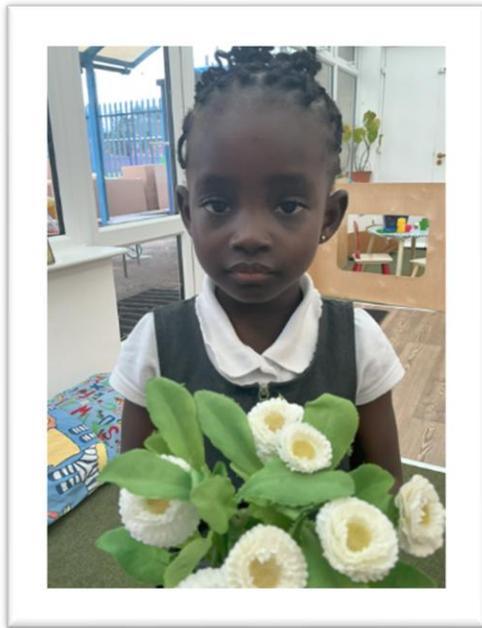
Holding one belief system whilst using strategies and actions from a different belief system is not specific to education and is not unusual for humankind. Most of us are familiar with expressions such as 'believing one thing, whilst doing another'. However, research from sociology and psychology suggests that most people - children and adults alike - recognise a person who says or does one thing, whilst believing something different (Festinger, 1957)[20].

In a schooling context, we often underestimate just how perceptive children and young people are about the adults around them, and there can be very real

---

[18] ibid

[19] Aubrey-Smith, F., (2025) *PedTech: The Impact.* Routleldge: London. Forthcoming.

[20] Festinger, L. (1957) *A theory of cognitive dissonance.* Stanford University Press.

consequences to this. For example, **in another part of England, as part of an unrelated study, a very articulate key stage two child** explained that;

> *"My teacher was talking to us about [SATs] and they said you have to try hard and do your best and show what you can do.*
> *Then they said afterwards 'but remember that it's only one test on one day and that we [teachers and families] know that you are more than just a test result'.*
> *But then basically all we do at the moment is prepare for the tests. When we're learning something, the teacher says how we have to do [a piece of writing] like this because that's how we will get marks in the test.*
> *I think that [SATs] matters a lot to them because it makes them look good if we get good marks and it makes them look bad if we do badly.*
> *So I don't believe what they said about we are more than just a test result.*
> *I think our test results matter more to them than helping us learn stuff that's actually useful for our lives".*

This child recognised the friction between what the teacher said they believed (about valuing children's development holistically), and the beliefs underpinning their practical everyday practice (prioritising actions aligned with accountability measures). Whilst this child was unusually articulate, they are not alone in their awareness. Post-pandemic research has shown in particular how traditional schooling models are seen as less and less relevant and appropriate for the needs and futures of the current generation of children (Generation Alpha) - with nationwide issues around attendance, behaviour, mental health and wellbeing and the consequent impact on attainment and social cohesion[21].

Whilst change is clearly needed, few schools have the appetite to change established systems and ways of working beyond surface level rhetoric - instead preferring the safety of familiar models in a landscape of high accountability[22].

---

[21] World Economic Forum (2020) *Our Education Ssytem is losing relevance.* https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/04/our-education-system-is-losing-relevance-heres-how-to-update-it/

[22] Edurio (2024) *National CST School Trust Report.* https://home.edurio.com/national-cst-school-trust-report/

However, there are schools who think and work differently, probing deeply into the very purpose of their school and the roles of the individual human beings within it. These schools are deliberately moving away from models of schooling which were established to maintain order in a bygone era (Brighouse & Waters, 2021[23]), and deliver a workforce suited to an industrial (rather than digital or global) era.

Beddington Infant School is one such school, and this report attempts to articulate the rationale behind their model.

There are many ways to learn about the solar system

Children in the Nursery enjoy sharing books

---

[23] Brighouse, T., and Waters, M., (2021) *About our Schools: Improving on previous best.* Crown House: London.

Super Hero Day in Year 1

Report Structure

Beddington Infant School describes itself as a "*school designed to be a learning community, reflecting a real-life experience*". Recognising that 'real-life' for human beings is complex and multilayered (e.g. Bourdieu, 1973[24]), this report has attempted to translate complexity into a set of accessible themes. The report is therefore structured around 5 overarching themes, as follows:

- Vision of Learning
- The School Day, and Capacity for Learning
- The Classroom as a Concept
- The Learner as the centre of school gravity
- Robust planning for Responsive practice

---

[24] Bourdieu, P. (1977). 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction', in J. Karabel and A. H. Halsey (eds), *Power and Ideology in Education.* New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 487–511.

Children in Year 1 completing an independent writing challenge

Vision of Learning

Nearly all schools set out a vision that highlights the importance of each child being an individual with their own strengths, needs and aspirations[25]. Similarly, most schools set out a vision about empowering young people to be responsible for themselves and to contribute to the world around them. Furthermore, most schools in the current landscape talk about evidence informed teaching and learning. These aspirations are well intentioned yet often much harder to embed into everyday practice.

One of the notable features about Beddington's vision is the way in which it is articulated[26].
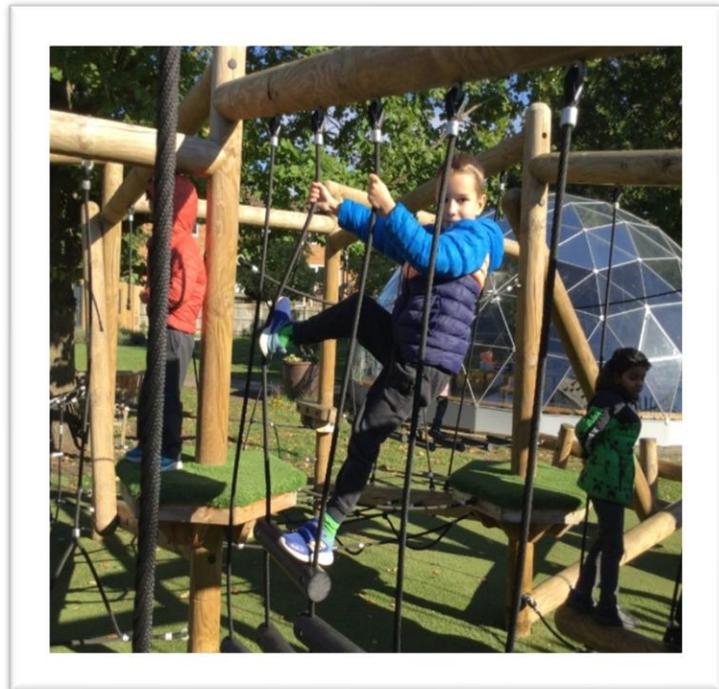
---

[25] Edurio (2024) *National CST School Trust Report.* https://home.edurio.com/national-cst-school-trust-report/

[26] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/about-us/about-beddington/school-vision/

The vision at Beddington is described as a uniquely immersive learning experienced, inspired by Reggio Emilia[27], and summarised as Seven Gifts of *Learning Naturally*:

1) Be a well rounded child
2) Be a good communicator
3) Be respectful and polite
4) Enjoy learning
5) Have strong core skills
6) Be a full member of the community
7) Be ambitious

The approach and impact of these seven gifts have been outlined in a number of documents created by Beddington Infants' School[28], and this report does not attempt to duplicate those details in this report. However, the insights set out below correlate with the findings of those internal documents and offer a form of independent triangulation on internal judgements and evaluation[29].

Children naturally seek out Next Steps and so, challenge themselves at lunch time too

---

[27] https://www.reggiochildren.it/en/reggio-emilia-approach/
[28] E.g. https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/about-us/about-beddington/prospectus/
[29] E.g. https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/about-us/governance/full-governing-body-minutes/

The School Day and Capacity for Learning

In state funded mainstream schools in England, children spend approximately 1,267 hours per year at school (roughly 6.5 hours per school day, 195 days per year). Of this time, approximately 260 hours (21%) are spent at lunchtime and breaktime[30], and approximately 130 hours (10% is spent transitioning in and out of lessons[31]. Even though this equates to approximately ⅓ of the school day, at most schools these portions of time are not viewed as capacity for learning, usually based on the premise that children *'need time to relax and play between lessons'.* The embedded assumption within this premise is that (a) children need to rest between lessons because they are under heavy cognitive or psychological load during the lessons themselves[32], and (b) that periods of time used for learning, automatically exclude mental and physical rest or play - positioning the two as dichotomous.

'Where the Wild Things Are'

---

[30] Based on a typical school timetable including a 20 minute morning break and a 1 hour lunch break (80 minutes per day, 195 days per year = 260 hours)

[31] Based on a typical 5 minutes at the beginning and end of each lesson, on the assumption of 4 timetabled periods per day in EY/KS1 = 40 minutes per day, multiplied by 195 days per year = 130 hours

[32] Feldon, D.F., (2007) "Cognitive load and classroom teaching: The double-edged sword of automaticity". *Educational psychologist*, *42*(3), pp.123-137.

Whilst the use of neurobiological theories touching upon cognitive load are relatively new within education, the focus has been largely concerned with raising educator awareness about: the basic principles of cognitive load (e.g. Sweller, 1988[33]); the importance of breaking down complex ideas into manageable, spaced chunks (e.g. Douglas-Fields, 2005[34]), and the gravitational pull of attention being about how teacher behaviour affects the cognitive demand placed on upon learners (e.g. Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968[35]). This type of attention is helpful when conversations are focused on individual

Education does not have to cost children their childhood

timetabled units of time (e.g. single lessons or activities). However, there has been less contemporary discourse around the scale and nature of cognitive load demand placed upon learners over the course of the whole day. Furthermore, discussion about volume of cognitive load that children experience, and the importance of balancing high cognitive demand with lower cognitive demand, also tends to fall into another trap - assuming that cognitive burden largely originates from teacher direct instruction. Whilst within individual lessons, this is the case for many children, research from the fields of biology and psychiatry argues that there are at least two significant additional considerations which are vitally important (Camacho et al., 2020[36]). The first being the cognitive load placed upon children as a result of

[33] Sweller, J. (1988) "Cognitive Load during Problem Solving: Effects on Learning". *Cognitive Science (12), pp.257-285.*

[34] Douglas-Fields, R., (2005) "Making Memories Stick"*, Scientific American,* pp.58–63

[35] Atkinson, R.C. and Shiffrin, R.M. (1968). 'Human memory: A Proposed System and its Control Processes'. In Spence, K.W. and Spence, J.T. The psychology of learning and motivation, (Volume 2). New York: Academic Press. pp. 89–195.

[36] Camacho, M., Quinones-Camacho, L., and Perlman, S., (2020) "Does the child brain rest? An examination and interpretation of resting cognition in developmental cognitive neuroscience". *NeuroImage (212)*

other influences (e.g. social interactions, physical environment and resource interaction, emotional and behavioural regulation)[37]. The second being the ways in which these loads and cognitive capacity varies significantly between different children, and for different reasons (e.g. social, emotional, behavioural, physical needs, including both diagnosed and non-diagnosed special educational needs or disabilities). Camacho et al., (2020), argues that adults often have a misplaced belief that children are resting cognitively, when often they are instead displaying physically restful behaviours (e.g. sitting or standing still), or socially acceptable behaviours (compliant playtime games), whilst still burdened by a very high cognitive load. Thus, the notion of a 'calm lesson' or children 'resting from learning at playtime' is problematic as it infers that attention to cognitive load, and to children's physical #and psychological wellbeing which is not necessarily being translated effectively into children's lived experiences and realities. It is possible that this widespread educator misconception is a significant trigger for dysregulated classrooms, potentially contributing towards the alarming statistic that 1 in 5 school aged children are experiencing some form of emotional disorder or anxiety (NHS, 2023[38]). These insights suggest that it is vitally important to review the balancing of children's cognitive load holistically.

At Beddington, children's 1,267 hours on site are viewed as precious capacity for learning. But importantly, this total capacity is viewed holistically (8:45am - 3:15pm) rather than as separate, timetabled, units of time (individual lessons, break time, lunchtime). This ensures that cognitive load is conceptualised academically, socially, pastorally and cumulatively.

Closely tied into this approach is that the physical school site is also viewed holistically - with every square foot of space indoors and outdoors viewed as being able to offer a stimulus or an environment for any point in that 8:45am-3:15pm capacity. At Beddington, the whole school site and environment is seen as space for learning, with every place and moment used as an opportunity to stimulate and nurture children's development.

---

[37] e.g. Langerock, N., Oberauer, K., Throm, E. and Vergauwe, E., (2025) "The cognitive load effect in working memory: Refreshing the empirical landscape, removing outdated explanations". *Journal of Memory and Language* (*140*)

[38] NHS England (2023) Mental health of children and young people https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up

Having completed the planning process, building begins

Unlocking Space for Learning

Historical models of schooling have often viewed learning as something that happens within timetabled, classroom based, often seated, moments. This creates a false illusion where other units of time (e.g. transitions between lessons, break times), and other locations (e.g. playgrounds, school field, corridors, lunch halls), are viewed as places that counterbalance classrooms[39]. For example, in some schools, playtime is conceptualised as somewhere for children to *recover* from the last lesson in order to be able to conform in the next lesson. Or, school sites are viewed somewhat like an archery board - where the further away physical places are from the teacher's board, or classroom, the less valuable they are perceived as being. This mindset creates false limits on time and space that can be used as a core part of everyday learning provision.

This nuance is important, because often in schools, learning is seen as something that happens predominantly in a fixed space - usually 1 classroom, with 30 chairs

---

[39] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Overview-of-Learning-Experiences-Key-Stage-1-Curriculum-Year-2-24-25.pdf

and a number of tables clustered or in rows, and physical resources (e.g. stationary, topic objects, digital tools).

In many schools there are timetabled 'outdoor learning' periods which either tend to be timetabled Forest School type provision, or occasional activities linked to curriculum subjects and utilised for motivational purposes (e.g. creating a numberline on the playground, or sitting under a tree to engage with a writing lesson on a clipboard).

At Beddington, there is a very deliberate rationale about viewing the 1,267 available hours for learning in harmony with a view on the school site itself as being one overarching space for learning.

That rationale encourages the process of planning for children's learning to:

1) **Identify holistic intentions for each individual child** (based on knowledge of the child's individual needs and aspirations, child development knowledge, and the national curriculum - *a more comprehensive form of assessment for learning)*
2) **Identify how best to stimulate, nurture and reinforce those intentions** - for individuals, and groups of children (considering time of day, role of stimulus, forms of support, role of peers and adults, potential outcomes) - *a more equitable form of individual educational plans),*
3) **Identify where and when those intentions stand the greatest chances of success**, based on these considerations, with alternatives planned in order to provide individual children with agency (meaningful choice) - *a more human centred form of timetabling and resourcing.*

'Play is our brain's favourite way of learning,' Diane Ackerman

Starting in 2012, Beddington's team have converted this approach into a highly successful operational model, with the following notable features:

- Children at Beddington benefit from approximately **323 extra hours of capacity for learning every year** (nearly 25% more time for learning). The whole of the morning (8:45am-12) and the whole of the afternoon (1.15 - 3:15pm) are used for carefully planned holistic provision (see later section on Robust Planning for Responsive Provision) - balancing children's need to physically move around or rest, socialise or work alone, engage in multisensory input or reduce stimuli, - thus removing the need for artificially separated 'playtime' mid morning or mid afternoon.
- Lunchtime periods **explicitly incorporate pastoral and social learning activities** (e.g. structured social skills activities over mealtimes), alongside deliberate consolidation activities which move shallow learning to deep learning[40] (e.g. adult led number bonds or phonics reinforcement games on the playground) - achieved by the effective collaboration and communication between staff, and deliberate. For example, it is notable that leaders spoke about a Year 1 child who tracked their step count as 12,000 in a single day, whilst simultaneously achieving at least age related expectations across the curriculum - illustrating that attainment is not the preserve of the seated child.
- Continuous provision for all year groups ensuring that every curriculum subject offers activities and tasks which are **both indoors and/or outdoors** (varying environment), and which offer both close-up, middle-distance, and non-visual dependent stimulus (**varying eyesight focus** and reducing risk of strain)
- Children being offered a 'menu' of activities on personal clipboards which they then have **agency** to work through at their own pace over the period of a day or week. Children track their own coverage on their clipboard, and task completion at the 'stations' (each activity has a space which offers instructions, stimulus or parameters to work within, the resources required to do so, vocabulary and questions to respond to, and means to record or evidence completion). **Teachers triangulate** this information to ensure equity and effective provision - **targeting their time** where it can have greatest impact.

---

[40] Wiliam, D. (2018) *Creating the schools our children need: Why what we're doing now won't help much (and what we can do instead).* Learning Sciences International.

- Children are **pro-actively taught skills** that **enable them to be agentive learners**. For example, how to choose the order of activity engagement to complement their individual needs (e.g. higher stimulus task followed by a familiar task, or social task followed by an alone task), their wellbeing needs (e.g. alternating indoor and outdoor, or close work with middle-distance activities[41]), and their behavioural needs (e.g. a task which may be less appealing followed by a favourite or highly motivating task - supporting self-management of deferred gratification)[42].

Children work together as 'Full Members of their community'
When we understand what is happening around us, we engage more fully. The children know why leaves fall from trees, every child and adult helps to collect the leaves and put them in the compost bins around the school. The compost is then used for gardening in the spring.

---

[41] https://www.aaojournal.org/article/S0161-6420(17)33464-4/fulltext

[42] Mischel W., Shodda, Y., and Rodriguez, M., (1989) "Delay of Gratification in Children" *Science (244)* pp.933-938 [43] Wyse, D and Styles, M., (2007) Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's 'Rose Report'" *Literacy 41(4) pp.35-42*

The Garden Room has many functions throughout the day, which include providing a quiet haven for children to come and go throughout lunch time

- **All spaces are used as opportunities for consolidating or stretching learning** by embedding reinforcement in everyday experience. For example, classroom signs have both exact photos or symbols alongside text and phonic dots on them for pre-readers, bicycles on outdoor roadways have bags for children to load with numbers of items (reinforcing cardinality of number), and real-life tasks which require children to apply curriculum skills (e.g. instructions to collect and deliver objects to particular places on those bicycles and tracking one more/one less each time), physically riding and mathematically calculating for purpose - whilst active and outdoors.

The Classroom as a Concept

By observing the behaviours and actions of children and staff across a typical school day at Beddington, it is possible to see not only the innovative approach to provision, but also the way in which it has become embedded and sustainable. For example, there is a part of each day where children focus on synthetic phonics. In most schools, phonics lessons tend to be carpet or desk based, with direct instruction from the teacher (often oriented around the teacher's board), followed by an independent or small group reinforcement activity (often paper and pencil based). There are some elements of this which are arguably necessary given that

Children in Year 1 completing an indoor independent challenge while others complete challenges across the year group, inside and outside.

the learning of synthetic phonics is an approach based on knowledge transferral[43]. In addition, the political framework that schools work within (i.e. national phonics checks in Year 1 and Year 2, with associated accountability and reporting), requires detailed reporting about individual knowledge acquisition. This generally results in a high level of individualised working in order to form individual children's evidence portfolios (often exercise books or folders).

In a national system of high accountability and low trust[44], these evidence portfolios are often seen as a safety net to justify professional judgements. Thus, an

---

[43] Wyse, D and Styles, M., (2007) Synthetic phonics and the teaching of reading: the debate surrounding England's 'Rose Report'" *Literacy 41(4) pp.35-42*
[44] Cook, V., (2024) *Rethinking Accountability.* Chartered College of Teaching: London.

unintentional consequence of the political framework behind synthetic phonics (and arguably other aspects of the curriculum as well), is that an individualised, evidence-generating pedagogy tends to dominate.

Children in Year 1 learning independently

The team at Beddington Infants' School have taken a different approach to this where the pedagogy pivots around child development rather than political accountability[45]. Over a period of years, staff have invested in professional research and deep collaborative discussion in order to identify the variables which will most impact children in their acquisition of phonic knowledge. As these children are aged 3-7, staff have deliberately invested time in understanding theories of child development, as well as educational theories, learning sciences and pedagogical theory[46]. Consequently, there is a deep understanding of what, how, where, when and why children learn - above and beyond that which has been set out in the

[45] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Beddington-Infants-Guide-to-expectations-for-each-year-group.pdf
[46] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/about-us/about-beddington/school-vision/

National Curriculum[47] and in the Teacher Standards[48] and National Professional Qualifications[49].

Phonics lessons alternate inside and outside.

For example, during an observed phonics lesson, children experienced a combination of chalk writing letters on the playground in pairs and groups, playing a physical game moving objects to consolidate initial sounds, finger tracing using a range of tactile materials (e.g. sand, shaving cream), and using auto-marking digital games to see, hear and match phonemes to images. Children are highly engaged and active in their activities, but, critically, sophisticated teacher planning ensures that this is physiologically balanced so that they:

---

[47] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum
[48] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards
[49] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-professional-qualifications-frameworks-from-september-2021

a) experience regulated rhythms of high and low cognitive demand;
b) move and rest as a natural part of their learning experiences;
c) use the range of sensory stimulus that is appropriate for their individual sensory needs;
d) engage with both socialised learning and individual actions, and
e) maintain healthy levels of natural light and fresh air - within learning time, not just between lessons.
f) Children in Year 1 learning independently

Importantly, children are not being asked to maintain long periods of close work[50], become over stimulated by the sensory complexities of traditional whole-class teaching[51], see socialisation as separated from learning, or be physically constrained to a chair for age-inappropriate periods of time[52].

It is not unusual to see these activities in reception and key stage one classrooms in other

Independent focus and dedication indoors and outside

schools, but the noticeable difference at Beddington is the way in which these are planned - by staff and children. For example, during observations, where children were engaging in independent activities, it was clear that a disciplined set of routines and expectations had been embedded, such that children experienced equitable access and coverage of the different learning activities - these were not 'enhancements' but part of everyday provision.

---

[50] https://www.aao.org/eye-health/tips-prevention/children-vision-development
[51] Thompson, S.D. and Raisor, J.M., (2013) *Meeting the sensory needs of young children.* YC Young Children, 68(2)
[52] Schwenke P., and Coenen M., (2022) "Influence of Sit-Stand Tables in Classrooms on Children's Sedentary Behavior and Teacher's Acceptance and Feasibility: A Mixed-Methods Study". *International Journal of Environmental Research in Public Health 19(11)*

Futhermore, each activity was designed to ensure robust formative assessment (e.g. small groups with an adult monitoring individual understanding, digital activities utilising auto-marking and teacher insight dashboards). This meant that teachers had a clear real-time view on which children understood, retained and applied their phonic knowledge, and were able to provide highly targeted, immediate interventions. It is this level of real-time insight and precision, working in harmony with the creative, flexible, and physical provision that underpins impact.

A moment to reflect on which challenges have been completed and decide which one to do next.

This focus on utilisation of real-time data to adapt provision and intervene with *forensic precision* is something that is not widespread practice within free flowing learning environments. This is most likely to be because it requires a high level of consistent, independent, sustained, and purposeful engagement across the whole class in order to create the teacher capacity to reflexively target their teaching actions. In short, it is the highly effective planning and embedded classroom management culture that creates an environment where children can be routinely independent.

Children learn to manage their time, problem solve and collaborate

Children engage in purposeful, task related communication

It is the children's independence that in turn creates teacher capacity to add value rather than merely orchestrate practical processes (e.g. activity instruction, task management and formative assessment processes).
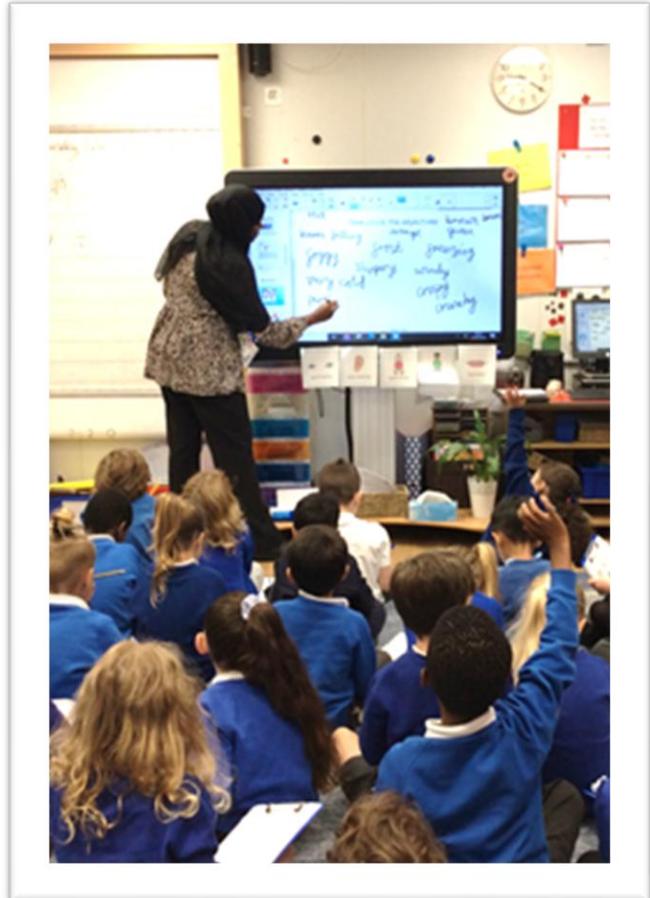

Children organise themselves to sing and dance together, fulfilling the requirements of an independent challenge

The Learner as the centre of School Gravity

Daily physical challenges develop skills and increase levels of fitness

Children are fully focused during short, whole class lessons throughout the day

As outlined above, everyday practice in a school is underpinned by pedagogical beliefs - i.e. belief systems about the role and purpose of schooling, the role of a teacher and teaching, the role of a learner and learning, and views about how knowledge is formed. These beliefs may be explicit or implicit and there are many different theories spanning across psychology and sociology that attempt to explain these from a theoretical perspective[53]. Pedagogical belief systems are complex and multi-faceted, and to meaningfully unpack their implications it is most helpful to

---

[53] See Twining, P., et al., (2017) *NP3: New Pedagogies, New Practices, New Purposes* for further reading.

focus on specific elements. One such element relates to how the roles of teacher and learner are conceptualised.

Put simply, the centre of gravity in a moment of practice will pivot around the teacher, the learner or the organisation.

This consideration is vitally important because that centre of gravity is often implicit rather than explicit and often more complex than it first appears. It is helpful to illustrate this. Most schools or educational organisations will frame themselves as being about serving the needs of their children. For example, most school visions will use phrases which talk about child-centred learning, empowering children to meet their potential, or nurturing learners to be ready for their futures. These are good and admirable intentions which infer children being at the centre of school gravity. However, when provision is objectively scrutinised through school development planning, or observed in action, there is often a subtle yet important difference[54]. For example, a vision may talk about supporting children to follow their interests, yet offer provision which is structured solely around the National Curriculum with extra curricular activities based on wraparound care or enhancements to curriculum subjects.

Children in Year 2 being 'Full Members of their Community'
as they help to keep their environment tidy

---

[54] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/School-Development-Plan-2024-2025-Summary.pdf

Or, a vision may talk about a child meeting their potential, yet organise provision and intervention that pivots around whether children are working towards, meeting, or exceeding national curriculum age related expectations - prioritising children who are borderline between those classifications. The important distinction is not to infer a value judgement upon such provision, but rather more surface that these are illustrations of *organisation-centred* leadership rather than *child-centred* leadership.

Children understand the requirements of each challenge and organise themselves accordingly

At Beddington Infants' school, there is a subtle yet important difference in the way that leadership approach provision, with an unapologetic focus on the ways in which the actions of adults affect the experiences of children.

For example, leaders have invested time in discussions with teaching staff about which activities require an adult (whether teacher or teaching assistant), and which

tasks or activities do not require an adult - moving away from historical or default assumptions.

> *"Leaders have strong expertise and knowledge",*
>
> Ofsted (2023)

Subtle symptoms of this can be seen through everyday classroom interactions. For example, in most schools nationwide, when a teacher wants to work with a group of children, it will be the teacher that brings those children to the relevant place. This may be by physically locating young children and shepherding them to a designated table, or by calling across a classroom - often disrupting cognitive engagement of other children. At Beddington, it was recognised that this transition from one group to another often uses around 12% of the teacher's time in a typical lesson[55], equating to around 40 minutes of teacher capacity per day that could instead be spent on targeted interventions supporting children's learning[56].

Therefore, the approach at Beddington is that once a child has been working with a teacher in a focused group, and has completed their task, they will take responsibility for passing the opportunity to learn on to another child. The responsible child will take a book out of the box on the designated teacher table, and that book is the book of the child who is next due to come and work with the teacher. The child will go to the 'next' child, and inform them that they are now due to go to work with the teacher, and as this is a normalised way of working, children then move to the teacher's table and begin their intervention. Importantly, the order of the books in the box is pre-determined by the teacher to reflect the learning and intervention needs of the children in the class (e.g. with the teacher pre-planning which combination of children they will have with them at any given point, and the order in which the children will come - ensuring effective working groups and understanding the concentration arc of the lesson time itself).

---

[55] Based on 5 minutes to call and group 6 children to a designated table space in a typical free-flow classroom environment, and a lesson period of 40 minutes.
[56] Based on 2 rotations per lesson period, and 4 lesson periods per day.

Importantly, at the beginning of the lesson, the teacher explains to all children when they will be called, such that children are supported to plan their time around the range of things that they know they will be required to do. Observing this classroom management approach in action illustrated that it is an embedded and familiar way of working - with children aged 5-7 confidently able to explain how they planned their time ('before, during and after' their teacher task), how they responded if they were called mid-task ('pausing' an activity and later resuming it), and how they respected their peers instructions (with a mutual understanding that another time, the request may be in reverse). At surface level this simple classroom management approach appears to be just the encouragement of children's independence within the classroom. However, the implications are striking.

Sharing a book with friends

First, that this creates notable capacity for the teacher to support learning, and second, that the embedding of this approach builds a sense that the classroom is a mutually supportive community focused on helping each other's learning - notably, democratising ownership of everyday classroom interactions.

> *"Pupils with SEND learn the intended curriculum alongside their peers"*
>
> Ofsted (2023)

Robust planning for responsive practice

Earlier sections in this report have identified a number of ways in which Beddington have created capacity in the classroom, democratised access to learning, and developed a learning environment that pivots around the gravitational field of each learner. However, achieving this has not been simple and is the result of extensive research and consideration on the part of the leadership team, and comprehensive thinking on the part of the teaching staff.

Fundamentally, the provision is made possible because of highly robust planning that ensures that practice can be highly responsive to children's needs[57]. For example, each school day at Beddington is structured around 6 interactive teacher inputs (a maximum of 20 minutes each). Of those inputs, 4 will be whole-class (2 in the morning and 2 in the afternoon), and the other 2 will be smaller focus groups. Around those inputs, children's time is dedicated to robustly planned independent learning time.

In order to plan for children to learn independently in a way that is meaningful, and impactful, children in Key Stage One use an individual overview of learning challenges on a clipboard, which they use to tick off which challenges have been completed. They are able to determine the order that they work through the challenges, with each challenge having a clearly demarcated place, expectations, success criteria and logistical rules. Accessibility is built into task design (e.g. sound buttons for pre-readers, dual coded instructions, physically accessible resourcing).
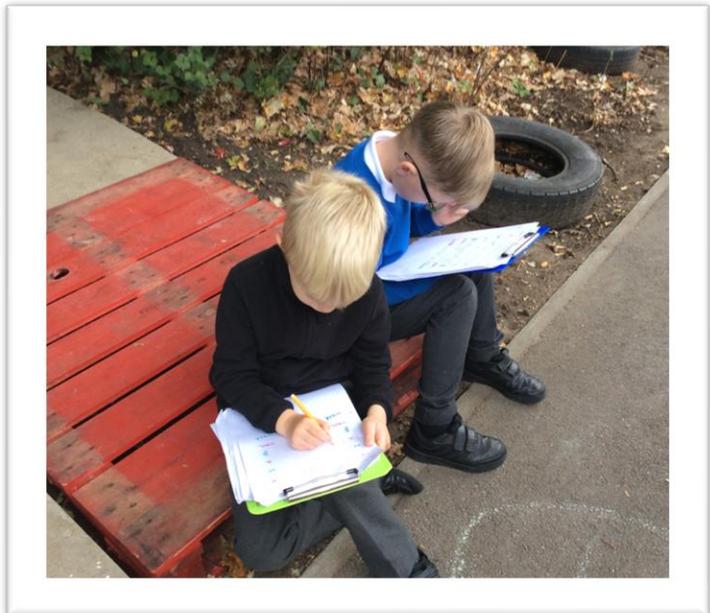
Independently taking stock of which challenges have been completed so far

---

[57] https://www.beddingtoninfants.org.uk/about-us/about-beddington/curriculum/

Importantly, the provision is spread across all indoor and outdoor space that is available for a given year group - with equal weighting given to each area of learning and both indoor and outdoor spaces used for all subject areas. This reinforces the Beddington belief that learning is not bounded to traditional classroom structures (i.e. just indoors), nor all teacher-dependent. It also embeds variance in movement, eyesight focal distance, social groupings and autonomy - all deliberate elements of Beddington's planned provision.

Children have many opportunities to develop concepts of themselves as musicians, mathematicians, scientists or artists every day

Significantly, tasks are designed and structured to encourage task specific oracy. For example, with purposeful, structured discussion points and vocabulary lists built into task design. This ensures that children are talking throughout the day - nurturing oracy and vocabulary development alongside social skills. It also reduces off-task talk, because children are communicating with purpose and authenticity with a range of peers and adults. Consequently, oracy levels across the school are

Children have a natural affinity with nature

high and Speech and Language SEND issues are low in relation to current national averages[58].

Children in Year 2 recording coverage of
independent learning challenges

As children complete tasks at given stations, they tick their name off on a list (with older children editing coloured cells of a spreadsheet to ensure progression even in this simple task). This enables teachers to track robustly, intervening if necessary to ensure that all children engage meaningfully with each activity. At each station, children are directed to work individually, in pairs or small groups, with the tasks structured accordingly. Resources may be partially or fully at the station - with children scaffolded through task instructions to source additional resources, encouraging further self-sufficiency. Teachers and teaching assistants are assigned to specific stations and areas - providing highly planned intervention that adds value to the children's development, rather than simple task management and

---

[58] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2023-24

compliance. Importantly, teachers and teaching assistants work inside for half a session and outside for half a session, and over a day will work equitably across all groups, stations, and children so that members of staff do not become associated with particular children, subjects or places - keeping their focus and association directly on targeted intervention.

Children in Reception completing an independent challenge and then recording completion on the year group recording sheet

Every day is a day for joyful music making

The layout of the school is such that each year group has three classes but those classes operate as free flow space across the year group. This means that each class has its own space suitable for what might be termed carpet time direct instruction with the teacher or whole class group, and also then a range of small group spaces suitable for independent learning tasks free continuous provision - both indoors and outdoors.

Children in Nursery exploring their Bug Hotel

Teachers plan and resource as whole year group teams, with provision and resourcing (including adults and their interactions) purposefully designed to be consistent and familiar. Consequently, there is a sense of shared community across each year group - with multiple adults all sharing responsibility for all the children in that year group. Critically, this means that whichever space a child is working in, and at whichever activity station, the adult (teacher or teaching assistant) responsible for intervention in that space is familiar with the child, their needs, their

aspirations and ways in which adult intervention will add value (rather than just micro-managing the task).

The decision for year groups to plan, resource, support and review learning for children across the whole cohort is a key factor in making free flowing provision achievable. The number of available adults means that multiple physical spaces can be staffed safely, which in turn means that children have greater access to meaningful, varied, learning spaces. In addition, for staff, the shared planning and resourcing shares out the associated workload freeing up administrative time. Significantly, staff spoke about the increased sense of collegiality (Hargreaves, 2000)[59], and in turn, the way that the sense of shared responsibility consequently increases quantity and quality of professional discussion about targeted interventions and support. In other words, children's needs are discussed and planned for with greater precision as a result of this shared way of working.

A quiet moment, taking time to examine a leaf carefully

The sophisticated level of professional knowledge held by staff across Beddington Infant school is profound in terms of its breadth and depth. Leaders talk about things like balancing provision with a very precise focus on the multitude of

[59] Hargreaves, A., (2000) "Four Ages of Professionalism and Professional Learning". *Teachers and Teaching, 6(2),* pp.151–182 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/713698714

influences that affect children's experiences. For example, Generation Alpha (children born 2013-2022), are growing up in an era known for increased levels of screen exposure[60].

At Beddington Infants' School, a typically thoughtful approach has been taken, which does not simplistically ban screen use (e.g. teacher digital boards or classroom tablets/laptops), but instead investigates the specific issues, draws upon research, and then adapts provision accordingly.

Provision at Beddington therefore ensures that children have a range of activities throughout the day: varying eyesight focal distance (near work - whether digital or paper based, and far-sight activities); varying lighting (e.g. natural light outdoors, natural light indoors, darker cosy spaces, minimising artificial lighting); a range of resources for activities - spanning physical objects, natural objects, digital resources, paper based resources; and a range of interactivity - ensuring individual, paired, small group and whole class activities.

Children in Year 1 documenting their morning

Furthermore, where resources can be personalised to become more accessible for individual children's needs and preferences, this is encouraged and enabled. For example, simple screen background adjustments from blue light to warm light, or

---

[60] https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/faculties/health-and-education/research/projects/tech-and-talk

screen overlays for digital activities, clear fonts on printed materials, personalised activities and calm boxes for children with particular anxiety or social/emotional difficulties.

There are many opportunities to make friends across all year groups

Children in Nursery understand that we all need a helping hand from time to time

Conclusion

In traditional schooling structures, children are taught to become dependent upon a classroom teacher in order to access, engage with, and evaluate learning. A typical lesson in most traditional schools provides a teacher input based on some form of presentation, followed by a structured test of children's understanding. This test of understanding is often framed as an independent task and progress through that task will be evaluated by teacher praise or corrections. Towards the end of the lesson, children will offer their submission to the teacher, hoping that it conforms to the requirements or expectations previously set out. This traditional behaviourist form of schooling has changed very little since the Victorian era[61]. It offers a reliable mechanism for achieving consistent test outcomes - based on the belief that learning is ultimately varying forms of knowledge recall. To use a metaphor - this system bears fruit for each harvest, yet exhausts the tree.

However, if children learn the foundation of skills required to become self-aware, competent, confident learners when very young, the many influences that affect them as they grow older are less likely to be detrimental and more likely to support and enhance their future capabilities (Manyukhina & Wise, 2019[62]). The role of the teacher - shaped by the school - that plays a vital part in the development of children's agency - and ultimately the ability of each little person to become a confident, responsible learner[63].

We can all look back and think about our schooling experiences and recall a teacher that had a profound impact on how we see ourselves as learners - either positively or negatively (Biesta, 2015[64]). Therefore, if we recognise the impact on us as adults, then we also need to recognise that today's educators also create this impact on today's children. Such educators are in part classroom teachers, but also include teaching assistants, catering and lunchtime staff, office and administrative staff, leaders, and most importantly parents. That combination of influences creates a

---

[61] Brighouse, T., and Waters, M., (2021) *About our Schools: Improving on previous best.* Crown House: London.

[62] Manyukhina, Y., & Wyse, D. (2019). Learner agency and the curriculum: A critical realist perspective. *Curriculum Journal, 30(3),* 223–243.

[63] Manyukhina, Y., & Wyse, D., (2021) Children's agency: What is it, and what should be done? *British Educational Research Association.* https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/childrens-agency-what-is-it-and-what-should-be-done

[64] Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015) "The role of beliefs in teacher agency" *Teachers and Teaching, 21(6),* pp.624–640.

narrative that is consumed by each child - setting the tone not just for their schooling experiences today, but in forming a learner identity that they take forward into their future life.

Children in Reception learning about birds during Earth Awareness lessons

When a tree has water, nutrients, sunlight and space, it grows and flourishes - stretching its branches far and wide.

We can grow trees in two ways. Both produce fruit.

We can adopt a disposable mindset - using the tree as a vehicle to produce large volumes of fruit and then replacing it with another tree when it tires. Our trees become fatigued and disconnected from the ecosystem around them.

Or, we can combine expert knowledge to nurture each tree - ensuring deep roots that provide stability over time, and a tree that produces an abundance of its own fruit year after year after year. Our trees become sustainable parts of the ecosystem.

About the author

Dr Fiona Aubrey-Smith **EdD MA(Ed) MMus PGCE BA(Hons) FCCT FRSA FHEA**

Named in 2024 as one of the Top 5 Visionary Women in Education, Dr Fiona Aubrey-Smith is a teacher, leader and academic with a passion for people and pedagogy. As Founder of PedTech and Director of One Life Learning, Fiona works closely with schools and trusts, professional learning providers and EdTech companies – championing a pedagogy-first mindset and a greater focus on the realities of contemporary education. She is also an Associate Lecturer, PhD supervisor and Consultant Researcher at a number of universities, and sits on the board of a number of multi academy and charitable trusts.

Fiona is co-author of the globally best-selling book From EdTech to PedTech: Changing the way we think about digital technology, and in 2024, Fiona was granted Freedom of the City of London in recognition of her commitment to the education profession.

fiona@onelifelearning.co.uk

@FionaAS

Cite this report as

Aubrey-Smith, F., (2025) *Growing Futures. An independent review for Beddington Infants' School.* London. 31pp.