

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

Getting to the heart

Forest schools are branching

IF YOU go down to the woods today, you'll probably find schoolchildren learning everything they need to know about the forest.

Helen Martin, head teacher of the Lavington Park Federation of Duncton Junior and Graftham Infant School, has used forest schools to transform education across the Rother Valley, where 16 schools are now teaching children about their rural surroundings.

And now, after a trip to India, Mrs Martin has something else to bring to the table – linking up with an academy-type school in Bangalore so the children can share their experiences and learning.

She's given the children the opportunity to appreciate what is on their doorstep and now she wants to widen their horizons too.

The new link made with the TVS Academy in Bangalore will give the children a taste of Indian culture, something Mrs Martin thinks is very important.

After a second visit to Southern India at Easter with seven other teachers, she made a link with the TVS Academy, which is sponsored by a business.

"Just like academies in this country, they have a lot to do with it. They want the best students to go and work in their company. These are not low-ability children," said Mrs Martin.

By Bex Bastable
bex.bastable@chicoserver.co.uk
Twitter: @bexbastable

"They are really forward-looking families who want the best for their children. All children in India have an enormous respect for their education."

Now, two teachers from the academy school will visit the Duncton and Graftham schools this week, and teach the children about Indian culture, how to make chapatis and teach them yoga.

"What I want to come from this is to break the stereotype down and for our children to see the Indian culture as something to respect and learn from. There are so many experiences they can share."

"We have a huge amount to learn from Indian culture. It is just amazing."

The two schools will do certain activities together and share their experiences over Skype and email. The children will write letters to each other to find out more about each other's cultures.

"I want to influence their thinking about the developing countries in the world and how we can learn from them," said Mrs Martin.

"The strength of family, the strength of support for Indian education and work ethic is just phenomenal."

"The concept of Indian time – everything happens when it happens – that view of time that is very much in our forest school."



Head teacher Helen Martin, pictured, right, with Vinutha Ronurkar from the TVS Academy in Bangalore, encourages her pupils to appreciate their woodland environment.
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Woodland way helps children's learning in

MRS MARTIN has spent the past five years running forest schools with children from the ages of three to 11.

In her own schools, the children have six to eight weeks of the forest school experience every year. Every Tuesday morning over a six-to-eight-week period, the children will get to visit their local woodland, and learn about the birds, trees, build a bridge, light fires, or just sit quietly and listen to the forest.

The benefits, she said, stretch further

than giving the children an awareness of their surroundings, but actually helps them in day-to-day learning too.

"Children learn in a very relaxed, calm environment. They started noticing more, they listen more. What we have seen is it develops friendships, collaboration and the issue of perseverance and really sticking at something," she said.

"The education system has a way of cutting down choices. We want to be able to give them as many opportunities in a

safe environment."

Mrs Martin has spent the past few years training teachers and educating children on everything they need to know about this unique new way of teaching.

"About a year after I started, I realised how important it is that if you live in a rural area, you should know about it," said Mrs Martin.

So the children will come away from primary school with a vast amount of

of the stories that matter to you

out from Sussex to India

Standards rated outstanding



SINCE taking over the schools six years ago, Mrs Martin has seen both schools receive glowing Ofsted reports. She had been head for around eight months when Ofsted inspectors last visited Duncton 'good' and Grafham 'satisfactory'. But in 2011, since starting up her forest schools, both schools received 'outstanding' reports.

The Duncton Ofsted report said: "In many lessons, the curriculum planning provides a variety of activities and opportunities through, for instance, the links made with the forest school, for pupils to make their own well-defined choices."

Inspectors at Grafham said Mrs Martin's 'infectious enthusiasm' has been the 'prime motivator for the successes that have been achieved'.

She was also given a special commendation in 2011, from the Royal Forestry Society for her forest schools' work at the two schools.

Helen Martin with her pupils gathering wood for a fire

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UNDER FOREST SCHOOLS UMBRELLA

- Lavington Park Federation of Duncton Junior and Grafham Infant School
- Petworth Primary School
- Bury C of E Primary School
- Northchapel Community Primary School
- St James CE Primary School, Coldwaltham
- Amberley C of E First School
- Fittleworth Village School
- Midhurst Primary School
- Easebourne C of E Primary School
- Rake C of E Primary School
- Stedham Primary School
- Holycombe Primary School
- Rogate Primary School
- Camsdale Primary School
- Hartling C of E School



other ways, says head

skills and knowledge about their local area. She thinks it's important to let the children choose what they want to do in the forest to give them independence. Last week, she said, the children wanted to build a bridge over the stream, so they did. "They feel much more at home in this woodland and just get it," said Mrs Martin.

Fifteen schools in the Rother Valley are now certified forest schools. "It's just fantastic so many children are getting the experience," she said. The woodland in Duncton and Grafham is owned by the Leonfield Estate, and Mrs Martin said she was 'grateful' for the support by Lady Caroline Egremont.

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