

Student teachers from UWE, Bristol spent 3 days supporting pupils in the exploration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Here they share how teaching about the SDGs during National Poetry Week both engaged and enabled important learning.

In April 2022, the government released their strategy for the education and children's services systems relating to sustainability and climate change. The first of the strategic aims in this document was that the UK achieve excellence in education and skills for a changing world, preparing all young people for a world impacted by climate change. In response to this UWE, Bristol's Initial Teacher Training programme looked for opportunities to further enhance student teacher experiences in the teaching of sustainability within its university course. This included a three day 'take over' school placement for third year undergraduates with the Sustainable Development Goals as the starting point.

A group UWE student teachers spent three days working with classes at St Nicholas of Tolentine Catholic Primary School in Bristol. Students prepared for the placement by considering not just what was appropriate content, but appropriate pedagogy that would support both learning and wellbeing. Student teachers were mindful that children can be anxious about issues relating to the environment and so carefully prepared by identifying good news stories and actions that would enable children feel they have agency and hope. Here we share how pupils in Year 2 and Year 6 were supported in their navigation of the SDGs, using poetry as a powerful tool.

SDGs, Water and Acrostic Poetry in Year 2

The theme we chose to focus on with Year 2s (age 6-7) was water sustainability as this was linked to a number of the SDGs– clean water and sanitation; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water.

We taught the theme of water sustainability across multiple subjects throughout the three-day placement. To begin with, we chose to use the picture book DRY: The Diary of the Water Superhero (see link below for a free copy of this). Through using the picture book as a hook we were able to get children engaged as they could respond to and see themselves in the main character. In addition to this, the use of the book also provided practical, realistic advice on small changes children could make so they can be part of a sustainable future. During our teaching and reading of the book, we referred back to the SDGs and made children aware of what they are and the different goals the United Nations are looking to achieve. We were aware that children could potentially find this topic overwhelming and were mindful of eco-distress. So, by referring back to the picture book, and bringing sustainability back down to a local, personally achievable level, the children talked about how they felt a lot more hopeful in the differences they could make and be part of.

The book led to the children making models of the water cycles; music composition inspired by the sound of a thunderstorm; maths problem-solving questions exploring the quantity of water

needed for baths or showers; art collages of rain falling from a cloud, and fact files about the use of water.

These sessions provided the knowledge input required for the poetry sessions which began with the BBC live lesson that was running in conjunction with National Poetry Week (The recording can be found here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/live-lessons/national-poetry-day-2022-live-lesson/z7jpywx>)

After the children had watched the live lesson we spent time making a class toolkit including lists of adjectives, sentence starters, pieces of punctuation, structure and also a recap of water facts. Throughout all of this, the children were aware that their writing had the purpose of informing their parents about water sustainability and what they can do to help which led to some incredibly engaged children with informative poems. Before the children began to work independently, we ensured we modelled a class example (for great examples of acrostic poetry check out The Lost Words written by Robert Macfarlane). Through this we were able to recap previously learnt water facts as well as features of writing. After the children had produced their poems they had the opportunity to share them with the class. This gave them the opportunity to use their newly learnt knowledge of tone in poetry speaking (that had been focussed on in the live lesson). The performance also allowed them to show off their work and communicate the important messages- something they were incredibly proud of.

SDGs and a poetry slam in Year 6

We felt that poetry would allow the children to express their own views and interests regarding the role of sustainability in the context of climate change and linked to National Poetry Week's theme of Nature. Just like in Year 2, we recognised that children needed knowledge about the SDGs before they could create their poems. We played an SDG game (see link below) learnt about recycling, repairing and reducing waste. We then introduced the poetry activity.

The most important thing for us when planning this poetry element, was that the children should have choice and purpose. Pupils were encouraged to follow their interests on any of the 17 SDGs, and prepare for a performance of their poems to another class.

With an emphasis on performance and oracy, content and expression were prioritised. This had the benefit of giving children who might find writing a challenge the space to succeed. Children's confidence grew as they experimented with ways of communicating their feelings about issues around sustainability. Without explicit teaching, children's poems used a range of poetic devices to convey their concerns. These included rhetorical questions, rhyme, personification, repetition, enjambement and visual references which were discussed and celebrated so others could magpie ideas. The class clearly appreciated a more emergent writing approach and explored a range of topics from the mountains, to the oceans and recycling.

Having completed their poems, each child spent some time practising reading and performing their work which built confidence and created an atmosphere in which work could be shared and appreciated. On our final afternoon we ended with a “poetry slam”. Here, pupils volunteered to perform their poems to both their own class and the Year 3 class who came to watch. The opportunity to share their work with the younger students in the school clearly excited and motivated Year 6 in their performances. Even those who did not want to perform live enjoyed the chance to video their recitations; every child took up this opportunity to communicate how they felt about sustainability. The pupils commented that they ‘felt listened to’.

Reflections:

Poetry has long been a way that scientists have come to communicate and make sense of the world. Ada Lovelace (who laid the foundations for modern computing), Humphry Davy (discoverer of sodium and potassium), and more recently Canadian astronomer, Rebecca Elson (the first scientist to use measurements from the Hubble Space Telescope to look into the early stages of the universe) were all poets. We feel that poetry offers a complementary approach to learning about and navigating feelings around scientific issues embedded within the SDGs. Reflecting on this placement, teaching about the SDGs through poetry is definitely something we would recommend: it gets pupils motivated and interested in a very real problem in a creative and engaging way.

Resources:

- DRY, the story of a water superhero
https://issuu.com/uwebristol/docs/dry_the_diary_of_a_water_superhero
- SDG board game <https://go-goals.org/>

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