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Ecotherapy – Our gardening nurture group here at Westbourne Academy

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The outdoor learning programme at Westbourne Academy is approaching its third growing season. Running the full academic year, the ecotherapy programme on face value, teaches young people how to create and maintain a multipurpose garden. The therapeutic benefits are limitless; gardening promotes healthy living in addition to supporting young peoples’ mental health and general well-being on a personal and social level. With our primary focus being from plot to plate, the gardening crew gain practical experience growing their own food. We chose to focus upon growing food to install a life skill that our students are able to use throughout their lifetime if they choose. Gardening helps young people become resilient, be responsible and become ready to learn. This coming year we will be aiming to complete the RHS gardening in schools programme, by achieving the prestigious level five. The level four certificate required the group to sell produce grown to members of staff, to provide funds for a future project. Students opted to purchase some interesting varieties of seeds, including watermelons, to be grown next season. Other aspirations for the coming growing year include more plant identification sheets, more practical assessments based upon RHS qualifications, in addition to challenging ourselves by trying to grow some carnivorous plants, which are known to be quite tricky.



The garden crew initially investigates different soil types, and how to maintain a good growing medium. We talk about how difference does not matter, when given the right support anything is possible. We look at how having the right nutrients and correct amount of water is important for growth, not only for our crops, but for ourselves too. We look at composting and how important it is to maintain the right balance of green and brown waste to create a new healthy growing medium. Gathering fallen leaves during the autumn term to create leaf mulch for our hungrier plants was great fun, if not a little interesting for those who witnessed the laughter at the leaves being thrown all over the place whilst being gathered. We have a new composting area behind C block, where we have been adding the peelings and vegetable scraps from the canteen, to other plant waste from our gardens, which the students built themselves using recycled pallets.

Growing plants from seed provides a visual example of how all great things can come from something so small. We look at varying ways of sowing seed; whether it is in pots, seed trays or direct into the position where the plant is to finish growing, including what the optimal conditions, varying seeds need in



order to germinate, such as temperature, pH and moisture content. The underlying message throughout being, given the right environment anything is possible. We try to use recyclable materials where possible, to reduce our impact on the environment, and to promote environmental awareness. We try to grow a wide range of plants to teach about the different groups of plants – brassicas, roots and onions, potatoes, and legumes. We also grow a wide range of plants associated with salads such as lettuces, tomatoes and cucumbers all from seed. The students love growing pumpkins ready for Halloween, so we have also tried our hand at growing different types of squashes. Students are both amazed and excited with the prospect of growing white pumpkins! We also grow therapeutic and culinary herbs, and discuss their uses. The full list of crops we try to grow each year is presented as a growing table (containing information on when and where to sow, when to plant out and when to harvest) and is put up on the wall in S5, where you can gain access to Gandalf’s garden. We try to grow enough plants for the students for the students to be able to take one of each type home to nurture, while maintaining a selection of plants to ensure we can teach our young people how to care for their plants.

Germinating seed is not the only way the gardening crew grow new plants. The underlying message when discussing taking varying forms of cutting from plants is how everyone has a different start to life, and whatever that might be, we all have the potential to achieve great things. By looking at plant structure, we take hard and soft wood cutting from stems, we talk about root cuttings and the importance of removing the roots of perennial weeds from our vegetable plots to ensure they do not return, and we take leaf cuttings. Students are often surprised by the varying different ways plants can be cultivated, especially when growing a tree from what is essentially a stick.

Once a term, the nurture groups walk round to the Bramford lane allotment field. Being the largest field in Ipswich, there are plenty of plots for the students to be inspired by. We talk about the different areas on the field, with plot holders access to water always being a question. There is usually a lot of laughter at the varying forms of scarecrow that have been created by plot holders, that is after the initial shock of noticing a manikin dressed as a zombie peeping through the vegetation. The way plot holders recycle materials to build structures such as sheds and their ingenious ways of protecting plants, also inspires our students to be more environmentally friendly in their gardening practices. These short walks also enable students the relatable experience of seeing varying individuals growing their own produce, and promotes the groups links with the local community. The group have also donated some unwanted plants to the allotment committee, to help raise funds for the field to run more community events and hold future open days. Committee members often grow on the plants, and the produce donated to the local food bank to help support the less fortunate within our local community.



Whilst caring for their crops, the groups learn the importance of providing the appropriate nutrition and amount of water, relating to the importance of maintaining a healthy diet as individuals, reinforcing our “from plot to plate” ethos. Harvest time teaches the importance of safety and trust, as students are instructed how to use the sharp tools involved with collecting their crops for the table.

Gardening in schools, encourages young people to take greater control of their own learning and become more active in seeking knowledge and solving problems. The changeable nature of gardening – where anything from the weather, the quality of the soil or even plant disease can affect the outcome – forces our students to become more flexible and better able to think on their feet. Through successfully growing plants, gardening ensures resilience, by boosting self-esteem, confidence and motivation; in addition to teaching the ability to cope with life’s ups and downs; and improving concentration by providing a calm place to learn. By being a part of the group, our nurture programme has improve our young peoples’ sense of self-worth; it has helped students overcome their fears, through the exposure to insects and other “creepy crawlies”, and it has improved attendance for those who were previously school refusers. The very hands on nature of gardening provides focus for children with a history of disruptive behaviour and enables practical ways of learning, which a classroom cannot provide. Our garden projects help teach our young people about living sustainably and their responsibility to the environment, in addition to enabling an increased awareness of their role and responsibilities in the wider community.

