

Problems logging in to your account?

Reader Offers

Ecologist Partners

Investigations: Free Trial Access

Part of the Guardian Environment Network

twitter ECOLOGIST

facebook ECOLOGIST

ECOLOGIST YouTube

CC BY-NC-SA COPENHAGEN COUNTS

Home | How To Make A Difference | Schools

SEARCH  Go

Register or login to your account

Activate your subscription

Sign up for our free newsletter

Subscribe to the Ecologist online

## CASE STUDY: Lewes New School pioneers curiosity-based learning

Nick Kettles

17th December, 2009

**How do children learn? Is it through testing or open-ended class discussions aimed at piquing curiosity? Lizzie Overton, head teacher at Lewes New School, is spearheading a new approach to education**

When Lizzie Overton first became a teacher, she never dreamt of working at an independent school. She was committed to the bigger picture, driven by the basic desire of most teachers: to reach the children who needed an education most.

She pursued her career as a primary school class teacher in the East Midlands and London (Hackney, Camden, and Haringey) for nearly 20 years, until her frustration with her son's own education caused her to reconsider her purpose as a teacher.

'I had tried very hard to do the thing I'd always expected to do - send my own child to a state school - but I was so exasperated by the lack of imagination that I saw in the teaching and learning there, I just couldn't stand by and watch,' she says.

'At the time I was also working in other local state schools and they were all 'delivering' a very similar deal - children were being pushed through a series of hoops with fixed outcomes designed by teachers. There was no outlet for their curiosity or creativity and I knew (instinctively) that it was not the only way to work with children.'

### New beginnings

Lizzie had already begun considering setting up a school to explore how to do things differently when she stumbled upon Lewes New School - 'a ready made working model' - in 2006 - who happened to be advertising for a new head teacher. She has been steering this school of 100 two-and-a-half to 11 year-olds forward ever since.

At face value Lewes New School seems to tick all the boxes you'd expect as an alternative school trying to do things differently: no uniforms; a commitment to peaceful conflict resolution; and an emphasis on development through play and craft in early years - not unlike Waldorf and Montessori.

They don't test their pupils or measure them against so called 'national norms' - rejected because of the stress caused to both the children and the teachers, which does not serve their learning or development.

### It's the money

So far so good... if you can afford it. Lewes New School charges £5,550 pa per child - at the bottom end of the private school fee scale, and comparable with the amount paid by the state for each child in mainstream education, yet surely bearing little relation to the realities of modern life for the vast majority?

'Lewes is a fee paying school but that's not by choice,' says Lizzie. 'Private education (in principle) doesn't really align with our values. We've tried unsuccessfully to acquire state funding, and while we keep trying, we try to keep our fees low to increase access to as wide a social demographic group as possible.'

'However, most parents weren't looking for private education when they found us: they simply fell in love with what we were doing. Many of them have to make sacrifices to send their children to our school. There is a huge demand for our school because we are offering something that many parents want for their children but can't usually find.'

'We believe we are making an important contribution locally, but it's what we represent contextually that is more important.'

That 'context' - and where Lewes New School departs from other alternative pedagogies - is something Lizzie calls 'curiosity-based learning'.

### Curiosity-based learning



Lizzie Overton of Lewes's New School

### Green Directory

- |                                      |                            |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>General</b>                       | <b>Health &amp; Beauty</b> |
| <b>Charities &amp; Organisations</b> | <b>Home &amp; Business</b> |
| <b>Clothing</b>                      | <b>Home &amp; Garden</b>   |
| <b>Education, Courses, Events</b>    | <b>Parenting</b>           |
| <b>Finance</b>                       | <b>Travel</b>              |
| <b>Food &amp; Drink</b>              |                            |

### More articles about

[How to make a difference | schools | New School | Lewes | Lizzie Overton | SATs | Waldorf | Montessori](#)

### Related Articles

- [A school built for green education](#)
- [Banning bottled water in universities](#)
- [How green is your university?](#)

In the broadest sense, curiosity-based learning is shorthand for the idea that children know how to learn innately. This is something educators knew in the 60s and early 70s, when an emphasis on child-centred learning was more prominent. But since the mid-seventies when this approach was judged (harshly, some say) as unsuccessful, successive governments have become singularly obsessed with two aspects of education: the curriculum (what children learn), and testing (how well they have done) to the exclusion of the third and crucial aspect of education - the pedagogy (how a child is taught).

When you focus on how a child is, rather than what they are taught, life changes for both teacher and student. This was the epiphany which Lizzie had when she came to Lewes.

'I only began to work and think in a more innovative way when I was "released" from the mainstream system,' she says. 'Being free of a system which constantly watches and judges the performance of both children and teachers, freed me to develop my own practice creatively.'

### **Guiding interest**

Lizzie says that curiosity-based learning starts when something happens which excites or ignites a spark or interest in the children. It could be something that a child has brought in to show the class, a visit to a local business or event. Then the teacher facilitates a discussion from which great questions emerge. The teacher doesn't decide the outcome in advance, but allows the creative journey to unfold in discussion with the class.

'They have to remember that their job is to facilitate the children's creative process and to put that natural human tendency to come up with the ideas themselves to one side,' adds Lizzie. 'Equally it's important to resist the temptation to dismiss ideas that the children come up with. When teachers and children really talk through ideas it's possible to find ways forward that both engage the children and reassure the teacher that there will be challenge and progress.'

One of the teachers then transcribes the discussion, and picks out the themes and questions that they know will be good for the group to follow based on the needs of the group and their experience to date. Once a project is decided upon, the teacher facilitates the learning to ensure a formal academic element, including Maths and English, is included. So, for example, if the project theme was 'rivers' the children might measure the width and speed of a river, to cover Mathematics.

The children are also encouraged to make their work public in some authentic way: an exhibition; or a play for the school community; publish a book; make a film. Nothing ends up in an exercise book where the only audience is the teacher.

### **Collaboration and curiosity go hand in hand**

Lizzie Overton is quick to emphasise the collaborative nature of curiosity-based learning - a direct challenge to the cult of individualism so often fostered even in mainstream education.

'Of course, sometimes a choice isn't unanimously supported - but it's a team game and everyone's expected to get on board. Children then work in pairs or groups, as projects unfold teachers ensure that everyone does eventually find their place and enthusiasm.'

She adds: 'Children at any time or when prompted by a teacher, can elect to engage the support of the group. A teacher will facilitate small group discussions where children can give each other constructive and rigorous feedback in a mutually respectful way.'

'We notice that children really thrive when they realise their view and contribution is genuinely valued and they are often more highly motivated by what their peers think of their work than by what the teachers think.'

### **A beacon for the mainstream?**

But could this system really work in mainstream education?

Lizzie Overton believes that any teacher could theoretically apply Lewes New School's approach in the mainstream system, but the spanner in the works is the testing that leads schools to overly prescribe what's taught rather than to work in an open-ended and truly creative way.

She says: 'It's impossible for a teacher to allow the inspiration of the group to direct the learning if they have a pre-prescribed outcome to meet in the form of SAT requirements.'

With the Government's position on benchmarking currently being weakened by teacher unions, it might seem that the door is open for incoming Governments to innovate, but Lizzie says more will need to be done than simply removing SATs.

### **What's the right answer?**

To really nurture a child's curiosity requires an approach which is both subtle and sophisticated she says. A teacher's tone of voice can convey for example, whether they are just waiting for the 'right answer' or whether they are genuinely interested in the child's personal response.

With even the Institute for Public Policy Research suggesting that an effective 21st Century teacher needs to be a subject specialist who is also a 'life coach', it seems that ultimately, teachers will have to be trained differently, for Lewes New School's approach to achieve mainstream acceptability.

'Children learn to a huge extent by imitation - if we want our children to be curious, creative, reflective, courageous, respectful individuals then that is what we as teachers must model,' argues Lizzie. 'I feel that currently teachers tend to be trained to perform and learn a role that has little to do with these qualities.'

'A teacher has to be able to share their own experience of what it is to be a learner, and to "be" with the discomfort of not knowing, of puzzling out with the group or an individual how best to proceed. Creative processes are by definition open-ended, and this often requires teachers to step out of their comfort zone to explore.'

This is something Lizzie admits is not always easy. Indeed, it would be easy for adherents of more authoritarian teacher-student relationships to dismiss Lewes New School's curiosity-based education as the same kind of 'touchy-feely' approach of schools like Summerhill, where children are even free not to attend class at all, but Lizzie says that is not the case at all.

'Our way is not a permissive approach which invites children to be rude, interrupt or not understand the value of compromise,' she says. 'Curiosity-led learning is successful when it is applied with a level

of rigour which requires the adult to be proactive at all times, including when they are listening - watching and waiting in order to judge when best to intervene.'

Until policy catches up or catches onto this leading edge thinking, Lizzie Overton's role as headteacher must sit alongside her role as lighthouse keeper, ensuring that the beacon of best practice keeps burning.

**To find out more:**

[Lewes new school](#)

[New School Thinking Network](#)

[What's The Point of School?](#)

[Do Schools Kill Creativity?](#)

Is this something others should read? If so...  **Stumble It!**

**READ MORE...**



**HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

**A school built for green education**

The newly opened Langley science academy in Slough ticks just about every box - airy, light, modern interiors make for good learning environments, and the school building is stuffed full of eco features



**INVESTIGATION**

**Eco-schools scheme help to 'green' schools**

More and more educational establishments are becoming environmentally friendly, thanks to the Eco-Schools scheme. Is this our road map to sustainability?



**HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

**How green is your university?**

From 'First' to 'Failed', student activist group People & Planet has created a new way of ranking the UK's universities - according to their environmental credentials.



**INVESTIGATION**

**Robotic children**

Production line education is creating clones and stifling the imagination of our children. Is it any wonder they are stressed and unhappy?

[Previous Articles...](#)

 | [Comment](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Trackbacks \(0\)](#) | [Email a Friend](#) | [Print this](#)

**Post a Comment**

Subject :	<input type="text" value="Re: CASE STUDY: Lewes New School pio"/>
Comment :	<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 80px; width: 100%;"></div>
<input type="button" value="Post Comment"/>	

[Home](#) | [Contact us](#) | [About us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#)  
[Advertising Policy](#)