Brushwood’s big dig

A thematic week allowed children from the Brushwood Junior School to excavate and research a specially prepared ‘Roman villa’ site while practicing a wide range of skills.

Philippa HOLDEN
(UK)

In the summer of 2008, the staff of Brushwood Junior School, Chesham, Buckinghamshire, came up with an exciting and creative thematic way of teaching, in the form of an archaeological dig. After almost a year, and what seemed a life time of hours, the staff had planned their theme week. During the Easter holidays of 2009 the Brushwood Junior School staff gave up their valuable holiday to dig an area of 10m × 8m on the school playing field which in turn would house many fantastic archaeological finds for the children to excavate and learn from. This site would become the main focus for the theme week.

The dig site itself was one of the most crucial and demanding parts of the project. A site had to be created which would be large enough for 60 pupils to work on at any one time and creative enough to look like the real thing. The site was started by removing the grass and around a foot of soil. Then, using a genuine roman floor plan, a group of builders began constructing the ancient ruins. This consisted of stones representing both the foundations and room dividers of the Roman villa, as well as several pillars in the centre. The site was then split into different quadrants and ‘artefacts’ buried throughout. Artefacts were strategically placed in different areas of the villa so that they could represent the different uses the rooms may have had.

When the children arrived back at school after the Easter holidays they were told that some ancient remains had been found in the school grounds while some builders were doing work on site. The whole school was then shown a DVD of ‘Professor Howard Smithson’ (a local actor) who was the ‘Curator’ of a museum. The DVD was set out to represent a live feed from Egypt where the ‘professor’ was working. This was the visual aid which formed the way in to the whole project. It gave the children the exciting introduction to what they were going to be doing for the rest of the week. The professor told the children that they would be becoming archaeologists and would have to carefully excavate the area in order to establish what the remains were.

Archaeologists from University College London came in each day to work with the children on the dig site. They taught the children the skills of how to be an archaeologist and showed them the professional tools needed in order to excavate artefacts successfully. The children worked in groups to unearth artefacts from the different quadrants and then took these to the ‘research centre’. This consisted of a classroom which had cleaning areas, tools, books and computers in order for the children to research their artefacts.

The learning outcomes for this project were to encourage the children to use questioning skills to determine what the artefacts they found could have been and which era in history they may have belonged to. This important idea of moving away from the simple rote learning of historical facts and figures and encourage the children to think for themselves and use their questioning skills to find the answers for themselves.

Fig. 1 Examples of Year 6 newspaper articles about the dig
Towards a more profound way of learning in that the children are analysing, questioning and hypothesising about what things could have been was a key aim of this thematic week.

This thematic idea offered the children an exciting experience which they are unlikely to have again in their school career. The enthusiasm for the whole week by the children was tremendous and the work achieved from this was outstanding. Numeracy work included investigating area and perimeter of the dig site and Roman numerals etc. Literacy work was achieved in the form of writing newspaper articles about the find in the school, letters to explain what they had found and stories about how life could have been in those times etc. ICT was used in many different forms throughout the week, including the use of Google Earth to determine aerial views of the dig site, internet as a research tool, digital photographs and green screen news presentations to name but a few. Other work included, mosaic making, drawings of finds, research around the chosen area, looking at different building structures throughout history etc. The areas for learning around this topic were endless and the work achieved in all areas was to an excellent standard.

The young archaeologists thoroughly enjoyed their theme week benefiting from being out of the confines of the classroom, learning practically and experiencing new situations. The whole project was a huge success and is an example to what extremes a project can be created and how it can help children to learn and gain valuable skills. It was a hard yet rewarding project that could not have been achieved without the whole staff at Brushwood Junior School committing so much time, energy and enthusiasm. The experiences that the children had during this week and the skills they developed will hopefully continue to be remembered throughout their lives.

Summary
La grande fouille de Brushwood
Pendant les vacances de Pâques 2009, l’équipe de l’école primaire de Brushwood a mis en place un site de fouilles pouvant accueillir simultanément 60 élèves. Le site reconstituant les fondations d’une "villa romaine" et ses "accessoires" pour offrir aux enfants une semaine de fouilles sous la directions

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Philippa Holden is a teacher and humanities co-ordinator at Brushwood Junior School, in Buckinghamshire, UK with a particular interest in teaching history.