

England, UK • Ruskin Mill - A Whole School, for the Whole Child, in a Whole Community

Special thanks to Matt Briggs, Keith Griffiths, Aonghus Gordon and Ruskin Mill Trust for this contribution

This contribution presents a UK based school that provides a comprehensive example of relational place-based education for children with special needs in practice. In essence it is an example of a 'WSA in action' within the context of [Specialist Independent Education](#)⁷⁵ for children and adults with complex needs, including learning difficulties and autistic spectrum conditions. However, its key philosophy, principles and practices are relevant for all type of schools, especially its utilisation of creativity, the arts and of learning rooted in the local community. This integrated approach to education ESD offers multiple methods and practical examples for meaningfully integrating sustainability-oriented education. It is important to note that most Ruskin Mill schools and colleges^a work with students who come with, what is named, an individual Educational Health and Care Plans (EHCP). The EHCP is created by a multi-agency group (include government and independent agencies) specific to each young person a set of targets that are developed to reach longer term goals of becoming more independent and live healthy, purposeful, and meaningful lives. In this respect, the craft and land-based activities serve as vehicles through which each individual EHCP target can be

addressed, tracked, developed, and assessed. Funding is provided by local authorities for each student's programme (or privately funded by parents/carers). This affords the schools independent status, which means they are not constrained or regulated by the national curriculum. However, they are still subject to regulatory inspection frameworks such as OFSTED, CQC and the independent schools' standards.

Contribution by Ruskin Mill Trust - Matt Briggs, Researcher and Lecturer, Aonghus Gordon, Founder & Executive Chair and Keith Griffiths, Head of Staff Education and Training: A collection of 9 primary, secondary and upper-secondary schools (age 5 – 25)

Ruskin Mill Trust (RMT) operates in England, Scotland, and Wales, offering exciting outdoor learning environments, utilising practical land and craft activities to support the development of work and life skills in young people with autism and other learning difficulties. For over 30 years, Ruskin Mill Trust has managed, among other residential placements and social care provisions, four schools (primary and secondary) and five upper secondary schools/colleges (taking students up to 25 years of age). At both the schools and colleges students experience holistic learning by role modelling positive relationships in the fields of

a: In the UK the term college is also used for secondary school education

Tutor and student working collaboratively in the forge⁷⁶



Key WSA Principles in action at *Ruskin Mill primary & secondary schools*

Pedagogy & Learning

- The Practical Skills Therapeutic Education offers innovative WSA learning and assessment methods
- Co-developed individualised curriculum for each student

Curriculum

- Craft based curriculum offers examples of how social, economic, and environmental pillars of ESD can be taught in theory as well as experienced in practice
- A Whole Child, Whole School, Whole Community based Curriculum
- Curriculum connected to social enterprise

Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination

- The vision, values and methods involve a strong emphasis on self, community and environmental developmental and renewal
- Seven Fields of Practice first step is a Genius loci audit. This ensures each school identifies a holistic place-based practical curriculum

Institutional Practices

- School grounds are managed following sustainable and ecological Biodynamic principals
- School farms and gardens produce food for the students' meals, sold in local community, and is used in some of the schools' outward facing cafes
- Sustainability policies in place, for example, for sourcing materials and products

Community Connections

- Ruskin Mill Trust's core purposes is to aid integration into community and contribute to society
- Students are encouraged to lead community and charity orientated projects such as restoration of community/heritage spaces

Capacity building

- Training and development opportunities for all staff and wider community is provided by the trust, from induction to a newly accredited master's degree
- The trust running the schools also support continual research and professional development opportunities for their staff through the 'Field Centre'

arts, crafts, commerce, agriculture, nutrition, living skills and the environment. By immersing students within the productive aspect of the curriculum, students learn to care for their own well-being and development and overcome

their barriers to learning. This approach is also embedded within a research and training culture up to master's level delivered through The Field Centre providing opportunities for all staff and the wider community.

Vision, Ethos, Leadership & Coordination • The vision, values and methods at Ruskin Mill involves strong emphasis on self, community and environmental development and renewal⁷⁷. The method developed called *Practical Skills Therapeutic Education* helps learners overcome barriers to learning, become skilled and contribute to community. Practical Skills Therapeutic Education and the underpinning Seven Fields of Practice have been developed⁷⁸ by Aonghus Gordon OBE, drawing from the inspirations of Rudolf Steiner (1861 – 1925), John Ruskin (1819 – 1900), and William Morris (1834 – 1896). Working with hand, head, heart and place, through practical activities, performing arts, therapies, culture and social enterprise, Ruskin Mill Trust aims to help individuals to re-imagine their potential.

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Learning at Ruskin Mill

The Practical Skills Therapeutic Education has emerged from 35 years of practice and on-going research, and the Seven Fields of Practice provide the scaffolding for the student journey towards the aspiration of developing 'self-generated conscious action'. This goes further than autonomy to acknowledge the capacity and motive, to give back to community and earth. The co-developed curriculum, not hindered by national curriculum requirements, supports each student finding their own route to self-generated conscious action through experiencing meaningful relationships with universe, earth and people. Therefore, each curriculum is co-designed with the student to suit their needs. This offers examples of how social, economic and environmental pillars of ESD can be taught in theory as well as experienced in practice. For example, the seed to table curriculum enables students to experience being part of a healthy holistic experience of growing, harvesting, preparing and eating the food in school/college canteens and public facing cafes, as well as being part of veg box schemes for the local communities and supplying shops. Other aspects of the curriculum include, vocational and work experience opportunities, a mix of therapies, music, arts and drama. Each individualised curriculum is built through role modelling (both via practitioners/tutors and the consciously created environments and workshops in which they are placed and purposeful) and contemporary apprenticeship learning in which the learner is invited into a production/world-based focus/outcome of their learning and involvement. This is functionalised by situating individuals within the real-world environments of the biodynamic ecologies and farms, craft workshops, cafes/canteens and shops, to name a few.

Practical Skills Therapeutic Education • Practically applied principles, known as the Seven Fields of Practice,



*Nature based practical education*⁷⁹

Staff and student in biodynamic school garden underpin the research-based method Practical Skills Therapeutic Education (PSTE), and guide each student's journey. These are: 1. Genius loci (spirit of place), 2. Practical skills, 3. Biodynamic ecology, 4. Therapeutic education, 5. Holistic support and care, 6. Holistic medicine and 7. Transformative leadership. In terms of place-based learning and community connections, the first field of practice (connected to Genius Loci) is an example of how a school can become further embedded in their local community and surroundings.

Each student is provided with an individualised and tailored curriculum such that the practical skills they will engage with are those specifically chosen to meet their own developmental needs. By providing students with the tools to transform material, they transform themselves. This is so students learn to recognise their capabilities and positively contribute to society. Schools also provide opportunities to relate the curriculum to the wider world and work experience through social enterprise. Although each learner's curriculum is individualised, the integrated syllabus seeks to create solidarity through establishing community (local and heritage-based events, exhibitions and community orientated projects), social enterprise (cafes, shops, farms, vegetable-box schemes, charity and nature-based projects) and festivals (celebrating seasonality and diversity through world and local traditions, cultures and beliefs) to achieve healthy movement between self and other. The craft and land curriculum further encourages ethical resourcing of materials and encounters with local environments, traditions, cultures and practices,

enabling community engagement in a very pragmatic and purposeful way. Although these practices require significant time and resources to establish, the principals could be applied on a smaller scale within mainstream curriculums.

Craft • Working from source materials through to purposeful crafted items provides holistic opportunities for learners to meet real life, world-based challenges, which in turn can provide therapeutic and educational opportunities within an integrated and true-to-life settings. In the craft sessions, students develop the ability to focus their attention, co-ordinate their movement and co-operate with others through the craft. By creating craft objects of the highest quality under the guidance of experienced master craftspeople, they create a new sense of their own potential and self-worth. Each school has a signature craft, for example: At Ruskin Mill in Nailsworth, the signature craft is textiles and weaving, carrying on the tradition of the woollen mills on the site; in the locality Glasshouse Stourbridge in the Midlands, the signature craft is hot glass and glass engraving - the students work in the footsteps of the master craftsmen who worked the furnaces before them; at Freeman in Sheffield, the students engage in the signature craft of silver and copper spoon forging and cutlery manufacturing carrying on the traditions of the Sheffield cutlery industry; Argent, in Birmingham, has jewellery making as its signature craft and students, like their peers at the nearby Birmingham City University – School of Jewellery, learn to make a range of rings, necklaces, and bracelets; and at Coleg Plas Dwbl, in Wales, the signature craft is greenwood work, building on the

traditions of Welsh chair making. These signature crafts form a backbone through the land and craft curriculum and help shape the other educational activities at the schools.

One of the most powerful and adoptable aspects of Ruskin Mills trust's PSTE methodology can be found within its unique approach of using a Genius Loci audit to reveal a local holistic place-based curriculum, which inherently addresses and enhances sustainable development on a multitude of levels. The audit involves several steps and approaches that help identify, connect and build a unique holistic curriculum acknowledging and utilising the local resources, history and cultures. By synergising these elements, a dialogue between past, present and future can be formed to help guide schools, individuals and communities towards a shared sustainable vision of development of both 'self' and 'world'. Through this process students come to acknowledge the 'world' as a collaborator and educator and begin to put sustainability, ethics and ecological thinking at the forefront of their own curriculum design. Functionalising the findings of the Genius loci audit into a holistic practical curriculum through craft and land work encourage meaningful direct contact with the world (getting hands on with locally sourced materials). By establishing a 'seed to table' orientated curriculum through growing and locally sourcing materials and food (ideally biodynamically or organically produced) people are given the opportunity to form ethical and ecological relationships with the world. The students transform materials and food into purposeful, sustainable, and community-oriented items and meals, that offer meaningful encounters that promote self-generated ecological and sustainable thinking and innovation.

Institutional Practices • The schools have a strong connection to the garden and the land, providing outdoor space for pupils to learn and grow. The curriculum at each site is supplemented by a wide variety of enrichment and therapy sessions in both daytime and residential setting. Each student's programme of study is crafted to meet that student's specific educational needs. All activities support the student to work towards achieving his or her potential and future destination, whether that is work experience, independent living or further education. Activities offered at each site are particular to the cultural and geographical history of the location of the provision. The school grounds are managed following sustainable and ecological biodynamic principals, which aims to create holistic symbiotic cycles, to enhance not only the land, soil, food and materials, but also improve the surrounding biosphere and environments by harmonising and increasing the capacity for life and nature. By placing students within these environments, they witness the role modelling of sustainable practices and holistic cycles that benefit themselves, the ecology and the community through the production of sustainable and natural growing and animal rearing practices (organic, non-intensive, non-toxic). Through this process, meaningful relationships and values are fostered between humans, ecologies and communities, which allow the students to experience real life sustainability first-hand. Researching and sourcing sustainable locally sources (where possible) materials used within crafts and subjects, allows students to make informed moral decisions and choices around the scarcity and sustainability of local and planetary resources and the direct consequences to the world of such choices.

Staff and student in biodynamic school garden⁸⁰



Challenges

- Any land-based initiative requires forward thinking and a sense of entrepreneurship as it is based on a non-standard approach
- There is a training requirement which requires practitioners to increase their self-reflexive process. The development of action research can be a guiding principal
- Practitioners need to approach the content with a collaborative attitude and teachers need to risk entering a domain of unfamiliarity to enter the practitioner mind set, however the rewards for teaching and practitioner-based learning are immense
- Requires external funding and grants (and large fund-raising team) which are mostly attained through its charity status
- Collaborating with the local community and various stake holders can be challenging, expensive and time consuming. This element takes a lot of considered coordination, but vital in both its implementation and impact

Strengths/prospects

- Harnessing and harmonising with the local ecology, cultures and history (via a Genius loci audit) can help reveal and acknowledge both negative and positive practices and approaches to help create a more sustainable and community orientated curriculum that meets the needs of both the people and earth
- A holistic practical focused curriculum involving land, craft work and nutrition, using sustainably sourced and local materials where possible, encourages situated and embodied learning for the whole human being and community
- Creating sustainable 'seed to table' systems for food and material production that involves learners (using Biodynamic/whole system principals) encourages sustainable, ecological and environmental practices and thinking
- The will and support for a holistic integrated approach as it is essential to the schools and not-for-profit charity vision

For example, using a sustainably sourced locally cut tree, instead of a rare hardwood transported from the Amazon rainforest.

Community Connections • Ruskin Mills Trust's core purposes is to aid integration into community and contribute to society. The focus towards community is paramount within the trusts PSTE methodology as it creates a pull (as opposed to push) for the students to gently self-generate their own desire to engage with community, society and world. Multiple opportunities for students to engage and develop both the local communities and wider society are experienced; farms/land (contributing produce to local communities via veg boxes and shops), cafes (using the grown produce from the land/farms), shops (selling and showcasing Trust grown and locally made, sustainably sourced produce) and exhibition spaces (where established artists, crafts people and student can exhibit and showcase their work alongside and for the local communities). Further to this, students are encouraged to lead community and charity orientated projects such as restoration of community/heritage spaces (canals, buildings, mills, greenspaces etc) which can help engender a sense of belonging, giving back and community building, while aiding integration into community and society in a meaningful and purposeful way.

Capacity Building • Training and development opportunities for all staff and wider community is provided by the trust, from induction to a newly accredited master's level course. CPD Courses in all 7 of its fields of

practice (with many open to the public) are also offered emphasising 'practice enhanced research, research enhanced practice'. These courses and other resources available to the students and staff also encouraging renewal and development in the Ruskin Mill Trust methodology and practices to ensure they meet emerging educational, social and environmental needs. Doctoral and post-doctoral research at various Universities along with other external research project - such as ERASMUS partnerships – serve to enhance our evidence-based methodology. The charitable objectives support the dissemination of all research findings widely and it achieves this in various forms, including 'The Field Centre Journal of Research and Practice'.

The alternative pedagogy and learning processes these school examples have presented interconnect all aspects of a WSA. They also illustrate how the craft process and creative based learning can reveal and meet both societies' challenges and potentials through an active dialogue between individual and world. In turn, this opens the possibility of the world becoming our teacher. The capacities developed through craftwork, such as autonomy, agency, innovation, self-reflection and a sense of morality and ethics⁸¹ are now more important than ever in helping to develop meaning and purpose in light of today's sustainability challenges: On an individual and local scale, and equally crucial in reconnecting us to the world, and stimulating innovation and solutions to address the new imperative within education of contributing towards sustainability, ecological thinking and environmental renewal.