

The Journal and Evening Gazette, in association with
Northumbrian Water, Schools Awards 2012

Inspirational Primary Teacher Award entry for



Chris Baker - An Inspirational Colleague!



Chris Baker is the Early Years Foundation Stage Leader at Edmondsley Primary School and one of our reception class teachers. She has been teaching for thirty years, the last twelve of which at Edmondsley. She is an amazingly imaginative person with boundless energy, a huge appetite for life and a tremendous sense of humour. She is extremely hard-working and leads from the front, demonstrating with a natural ease how to cope successfully and constructively with the constantly challenging situations working in a busy school with responsibility for so many small children, inevitably brings.

Learning is Fun!

Chris handles the everyday running of her classroom with aplomb. She is a natural communicator who relates readily to children, her colleagues and parents. Her department has a clear sense of unity and direction. Chris is also our Numeracy coordinator and as such is informed, supportive and fully aware of current requirements. She is a charismatic leader with the respect of a united, strong team behind her.

Every day in reception class is an adventure. Chris creates memories her pupils will enjoy and remember. For example 'Jolly Phonics' provides weekly opportunities for themed days with staff and children dressing up as pirates for P P P P P day or wearing their wellies and waterproofs, carrying umbrellas and running around the playground beneath a fountain of water from the hose pipe for U U U U U day.

She recognises the importance of giving her children a broad range of experiences to stimulate their senses and develop their imaginations. With the 'child lead' approach to learning, Chris has recognised the importance of the children accessing a range of environments for explorative play and has gone out of her way to provide them.



Teddy bears picnic



Royal wedding - complete with royal family, bridesmaids, groom, archbishop, photographers, press, wedding breakfast, rings and kiss!



Hiding in the den!

The Quadrangle

The quest to develop EYFS play spaces began ten years ago with an internal quadrangle which had only ever been a rather overgrown and underused paved garden. Chris saw its potential and applied for a Lottery grant to refurbish the area, enlisting also the help of a parent to build some covered decking and steps leading from reception classroom to the quadrangle. The area was furnished with a large playhouse, sandpit, water tray, wheelbarrows, workbench, building blocks and seating spaces. A local firm kindly provided a door to link the areas and immediately reception playspace doubled in size and potential.

The Muddy Bank

Chris then turned her attention to the space outside of her classroom where it opened onto the playground. A narrow paved area lead to a muddy bank that had once been grass but was criss-crossed with children's 'desire lines' where they ran backwards and forwards at playtime. Chris enlisted the support of Ivan, a local parent who led other parents and some of the older children, removing the remains of the turf and digging the compressed earth over. Chris then organised a 'bring a rock to school day' and miraculously we had the beginnings of a rockery, which was then planted up with donated clumps of butterfly friendly flowers and shrubs. This revitalised garden provided an attractive division between the open path/playing fields and classrooms, and over that summer, potted plants and garden seating arrived, largely donated by our families and the local garden centre.



Ivan, the boys and the rocks.



Later that summer, planted and attractive play space.



as it is now. Mature garden, new path, shade sails

Now reception class had another designated, attractive all weather playspace with seating areas for quiet talk and a vividly colourful

butterfly garden with interesting habitats to examine and search for minibeast, which everyone in the school benefitted from during playtimes. Chris sent details of the project to a 'Greenfingers Challenge' competition and won the regional final and £1000 towards future projects.

The Allotment

The following year Chris visited The Eden Project whilst on holiday and returned in September, full of ideas for a child friendly allotment garden. Our meadow at that time was an attractive but underused resource and it was decided to build an accessible school allotment in one corner. A site survey found the best place and the staff/parent/children team set to work. The first year we built four metre square raised beds, filled them with donated topsoil and planted them. As the children tended the beds and were amazed at the results we soon realised the potential of involving the whole school in our allotment project. Chris had set the ball rolling and took her children to the meadow most days. By the following year four more beds were added...then a shed...compost bins...water butts....tools...wheelbarrows. Today each class is responsible for one bed while Environment Club coordinates the allotment. Apple trees, raspberries, rhubarb and strawberries are also thriving. A tree nursery behind the shed is nurturing young trees for replanting and another outdoor explorative learning space has been established for all pupils to access.....and it all began with Chris Baker.



The first beds and deciding where a shed could go.



Admiring an early harvest.....and some ducklings hatched in reception class

Foundation Stage Outside Classroom

With the arrival of the new EYFS in September 2008 a new and challenging outdoor area for our younger children was needed so with limited funds available Chris set about creating one. She first invited a local company to bring along their graduate trainees (planners, architects, landscapers) who worked with the children to design an outdoor area on a section of the school field. Local businesses were then approached to donate soil to form the structure of the area. Chris coordinated mums, dads, aunts, uncles, some pupils and teachers, who spent many weekends creating a series of mounds for the sand pit, construction, art and creative areas. A large gazebo was erected which formed a 'performing' area. To the south of the new outdoor area is an area of trees and long grass which forms the 'wildlife area'. A selection of bird tables, feeders, boxes, log piles and hedgehog houses have been placed in this area along with a 'hide' to inspire and encourage the children to observe their surroundings.



The ground was marked and turf cut away



Mounds of soil were built



The mounds were covered with turf



A gazebo was built in the centre of the area and a tower above a sandpit to one side. See Chris up the ladder!



A hide was constructed for birdwatching....



Chris paddling..... - Mission accomplished!



Reception children at play! They approve.



Since then the EYFS area has evolved further with a summerhouse, art area and more raised beds for growing flowers and vegetables. Trees have been planted by the children around and within the area to provide

shade and further habitats/areas of interest. A growing willow tunnel has been planted.

The area is still evolving. In January 2011 Chris Baker was awarded an LOtC award (Council for Learning Outside the Classroom-) for 'Excellence and Innovation'. The award recognised the school's commitment to providing a creative curriculum that challenges children and offers hands-on experiences.

Every year the reception class set eggs in an incubator and hatch chickens or ducklings. These then go to local allotments belonging to parents. Chris has also established the routine of an annual visit to a local farm at lambing time to watch lambs being born and each year she brings some lambs to school so the older children can also enjoy cuddling and observing them.



A Forest School

For several years, during the summer term Chris Baker has taken the reception class for a weekly walk to Edmondsley Woods. Parents and friends were encouraged to join in and the children became familiar with their local environment and observed its changes on a regular basis. The children learned the names of the wild flowers, trees and geographical features in their local area.

Convinced that there was further learning potential in being outdoors in the woods, Chris researched a Forest Schools approach to learning and enrolled herself for training. She went on to achieve Level 3 training with 'Mindstretchers' in Auchlone, Scotland. Subsequent visits by reception class to Edmondsley Woods on Thursdays and Fridays throughout spring and summer, have engaged the school's extended community, involving grandparents and parents, providing immeasurable and valuable learning opportunities, encouraging a love of and respect for, nature. Durham Wildlife has provided the support of an ancient tree expert, while University of Northumbria student teachers have observed and supported our activities. We now act as a link to other Durham schools on the Forest School Project.



A Forest
Schools
approach
to
learning.

Mums and a granddad help make fishing rods from twigs.



Chris (with stick) observing and encouraging.

All-weather suits hanging up to dry outside of reception classroom after another busy day. Her first project - the butterfly garden - can be seen to the left, flourishing.

Game for anything!



A 50th birthday 'treat' - Chris in pink hat

Chris is passionate about sport and has always supported her own family's sporting activities. Hockey is their game and over the years Chris has shared her expertise and enthusiasm for the game coached hockey higher up the school.

On holiday to Africa she visited a local school with very limited resources and returned to Edmondsley determined to help. Materials were subsequently sent our World Wall displayed images of her adventure. Soon after, to support our WATERAID fundraising initiative Chris and her class lead a whole school assembly to highlight the value of clean water and the importance of not wasting it. Each beat of a constantly slow beating drum signified the death of an African child through dirty water illnesses. It was a moving and valuable lesson for us all.

This year our school are planning week of activities leading up to the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. Chris has already lead the planting of a Jubilee Wood in our meadow with all children planting a named tree that they will remember and help to nurture during their time at Edmondsley. She has created a firepit nearby for Forest Schools fires and serious marshmallow toasting. A giant wigwam is planned nearby as a meadow base for all classes to use.

In Conclusion

Over the last 14 years Edmondsley's Green Ethos has constantly grown. We have achieved three Green Flags and have become a Climate Change Lead School, a Healthy School and an Active Mark School achieving recognisable standards in many areas. While Chris has not always been involved with the application for these awards, her support has always been wholehearted. She embraces sound ideas and supports other members of staff warmly. Chris has a contagious sense of humour and great energy. She is a strong driving force in our school, has great vision and is an incredibly hard worker. She is the epitome of an inspirational teacher and it would be wonderful to have her achievements recognised. If Edmondsley is the pond, then Chris Baker is the pebble, and her ripples reach out in every direction.



