

People often ask me why, after a 20-year career as a primary school teacher, I chose, in 2012, to work as a freelance environmental education trainer and consultant in Dubai. I've lived in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for nine years now and I know the problems. It has one of the highest levels of waste per capita in the world as well as the highest water consumption. Only this year, it was found to have, not surprisingly, the third highest carbon footprint in the world.

'An enormous challenge'

So, my answer to the question is simple: there is a greater need out here to change the way society views wasteful practices. The UAE is a relatively new country and has developed at an incredible speed. It is willing to learn and is learning fast. It is certainly a country that recognises the sustainable direction it needs to go in, but it faces an enormous challenge: a population that is far from being environmentally conscious.

First, the UAE's phenomenal growth has resulted in a huge surge in the volume of waste generation: for example, Abu Dhabi's average annual per capita household waste stands at 730kg, and Dubai follows closely at 725kg, compared with 450kg per capita for the United States and 423kg for the UK. It makes you think.



A greener Charting progress



Environmentalism, Pete Milne, discusses the challenges he has faced and successes achieved while working to raise the profile of environmental issues in nursery schools in the United Arab Emirates

Significantly, it is only recently that the UAE has taken stock of the impact of its waste and the importance that education plays in the process of reducing it. So, despite there being recycling facilities and various waste-reduction campaigns, what the UAE, compared with the UK, does not have at present are systems in place to encourage good practice, established norms of behaviour and, most important, accountability.

Mixed messages

Generally speaking, children are being brought up in Dubai, for example, without a consistent effort to educate them about proper waste management, and quite often they are getting mixed messages from home and school.

Having discussed this with both individuals and companies, I have found there is a general lack of awareness of what happens to waste and the impact it has on the environment.

Expat children, brought up in Dubai, for example, are detached from the attitudes and behaviour in their home countries, and the very lack of systems and transparency deters parents from encouraging

their children to recycle. Crucially, for many - both locals and expats - there is always somebody else to do the job for them, and that includes picking up litter and making waste 'disappear'.

A common remark during parent and teacher workshops I have run is that, in their home country, they were more diligent with recycling, whereas, in Dubai, they don't really bother because there is little evidence that things get recycled. The latter is an understandable misconception, because the waste management companies themselves have as yet not invested enough in education.

Making progress

Nevertheless, there is real progress. In Sharjah, for example, the education department and Bee'ah Waste Management Company have collaborated with local schools to teach communities about the impact that waste has on the environment, and this is certainly the right way to go.

Meanwhile, in Dubai, the Target Green Nursery Programme, which I set up, has proved to be a great success, thanks to support from the Early Years Educational Services (EYES), who work closely with

world in the UAE



The United Arab Emirates

The UAE is located in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula on the Persian Gulf, bordering Oman to the east and Saudi Arabia to the south, as well as sharing sea borders with Qatar and Iran. It consists of emirates or principalities:

- Abu Dhabi ● Ajman ● Dubai
- Fujairah ● Ras al-Khaimah ● Sharjah
- Umm al-Quwain

nurseries, providing staff training and development.

It all started with a couple of Cache training workshops which I volunteered to run for EYES to help gauge the interest of nursery managers and to promote the programme. These proved to be successful, and attracted sponsorship for the programme from Emirates National Bank of Dubai, who initially provided funding for 10 schools, and are now funding a further 10 with a view to expanding it further within the UEA.

Sarah Rogers, director of EYES, explains: "It is crucial to work with children from an early age to raise their awareness of environmental issues and help them to understand the responsibility we all have to use the resources we have wisely. We know that habits are formed early and by working with children we can also influence the decisions their families make about green issues."

Involving everyone

So, a key element of the programme's success is running it as a whole-school initiative involving the community. This means working directly with pupils, parents and teachers, focusing on the why, and then the how. With all this in mind, the programme includes:

- an in-school assessment of waste, energy, water and resources
- a workshop for teachers
- interactive activities with the children
- a meeting with key personnel at the school to discuss planning
- a parent workshop, with discussion time – and also family trips.

Key factors for success

What we have found, as you have in the UK, is that senior managers must be proactive in developing a school ethos, if it is to go beyond mere promotion of good environmental

practice to genuinely walking the talk.

It is also important to bring in staff training that focuses on the school or nursery as a whole and helps to motivate and encourage teachers to look for cross-curricular opportunities. What we want is for them to be leaders in good practice, both in the physical classroom through energy and waste conservation, and when out on field trips.

Winning over the children

We knew that empowering children and staff with the knowledge and understanding to reduce, reuse and recycle would naturally lead to changes at home, and these will, in turn, cascade to the parents' workplaces. A letter to parents reinforces the environmental ►

➤ message, explaining the thinking behind the initiative. Then, with the support of parents, we can encourage the children to make positive changes at home, thus saving energy, water and reducing waste.

Reconnecting with nature

As long as students of all ages, including under-fives, understand why we need to change, and are part of the rethinking process, then we can develop future generations that genuinely care about the world around them.

With such a diverse mixture of cultures and nationalities in Dubai, teaching three-to-five year-olds about the environment and how to look after it certainly has its challenges. But what we have found is that the programme has re-connected all these children with the natural environment.

This is a big issue in Dubai, where many children have never had the opportunity to explore the mountains, wadis, mangroves and deserts beyond the city limits. Why is this? A mixture of comfort-zone mentality, the overwhelming heat and a dearth of established nature reserves and other facilities.

We have found that using very visual stimuli, particularly a toy turtle and camel as recognisable central characters in the storytelling sessions, helps make the cultural differences and the different levels of knowledge merge.

For the children, it is simple. They learn about their local environment, the animals and plants that live there and how waste damages these natural habitats; and they enjoy interactive activities and story-telling that encourage them to sort waste and give them choices to make which are better for the animals.

Is it working?

Raising awareness of proper waste management and energy- and water conservation from an early age in this way has led to early understanding and a change of attitude. As a result, there have been real improvements in the choices people make, not least because there are now systems in place to support those choices.

As an added incentive, schools naturally save money as a result of waste, water and energy reduction,



Learning about the environment

and, as the vast majority of schools in Dubai are run as private businesses, this tends to be the best selling point.

Eco-schools

There are certainly similarities with the eco-schools programme, which is managed in the UAE by Emirates Wildlife Society in association with WWF (EWS-WWF), but in the UAE there is not the same foundation of knowledge as in the UK, for example, while the environment is not accorded the same level of importance as in other countries worldwide that run the Eco-Schools programme. Here, schools have no dedicated in-school and expert support, and the emphasis tends to be more on the 7+ age group.

In fact, the programme is not currently offered to nursery schools, and, therefore, three-to-five-year-olds do not benefit from early environmental education.

Considering that in Dubai alone, this age group has seen the largest increase in numbers of 14.7 per cent - or 43,324 under-fives in 2012-13 (not including children registered at the 120 independent early years education centres in Dubai), then it's clear there are many lost opportunities.

Having worked at a school in Dubai that achieved the Green Flag in 2012, I can say from first-hand experience that, without that initial and ongoing in-school support to help galvanize a fairly transient school community, it becomes harder to reach the full potential of the programme.

The most effective and long-lasting approach to good EY Environmental Education comes from:

- whole-school and community engagement
- environmentally aware and motivated staff
- a cross-curricular approach, bringing real-life learning into key concepts
- students who are empowered, from a young age, to create solutions to the environmental issues we face
- schools that see the value in investing in better solutions to reduce water, energy and waste
- creating specialist roles within the school to oversee the physical and mindset changes needed to operate in a more sustainable way.

Need for change

With schools run as businesses and huge pressure to be the best, quite often the pressure on teachers and management is such that environmental initiatives can be pushed aside. Were there greater emphasis on sustainability and environmental education within the school inspection process in UAE run by KHDA (Knowledge and Human Development Authority), schools would be forced to look harder at this vitally important area of education.

All over the world

Finally, it is clear that the key to the future of this planet is to help our younger generation be more caring and less wasteful and, by doing so, we will be inspired by the children to be the same. This means that early years environmental initiatives, wherever in the world they apply, have to be designed to incorporate the heart of what sustainability is all about: maintaining the quality of life for future generations by making sure that we have, and will continue to have, the water, materials, and resources to protect human health and our environment. ■

- Pete Milne has worked with many companies across the UAE, pioneering the role of environmental education co-ordinator. It was working in that capacity with Raffles World Academy that he enabled them to achieve the Green Flag, one of the first schools to do so in the Middle East.

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