Learning science at home - independent and state school partnerships rise to the challenge

Abingdon School, Oxfordshire, prides itself on the value placed on engaging with the local community and other schools in the area through Abingdon School in Partnership (ASiP) initiatives. The strong, professional relationships built up over a number of years is paying dividends during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly for ASiP's Abingdon Science Partnership (ASP), which works with science coordinators from over 30 local schools through established networks in the area. A report by Jeremy Thomas, Science Partnership Coordinator at Abingdon School.

The ASP supports many science-related opportunities for the local community. A programme of primary science workshops, designed specifically for the KS1 and KS2 science curriculum, is run in a bespoke science lab in the School's Yang Science Centre and support for the British Science Association's CREST Award scheme leads to hundreds of local children obtaining the award each year. Workshops and activities, such as GCSE Astronomy, are offered at secondary level and ASP is a main supporter of the annual Abingdon ATOM Festival of Science and Technology, with the school providing venues for many key events. Such activities have led to strong bonds of professional respect and friendship between staff and pupils at all the schools involved.

When it became apparent that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic would involve restriction of public gatherings and school closures, Partnership activities became an immediate casualty with visits between schools prohibited even before closures began. However, it was also obvious that this was an opportunity to adapt existing ASP resources and collaborations to new and challenging circumstances. The aim of ASP became to try to provide meaningful science education for children at home, but also to provide time-saving support to teachers and parents suddenly coping with new demands and the flood of uncoordinated, online resources being offered to them.

Our partners instantly engaged with the idea, particularly Holly Irving, Science Co-ordinator at Caldecott Primary School, and Ruth Barnett, at Sunningwell Primary School, who contributed ideas for generic lesson plans and then reviewed resources using their specialist, primary science knowledge. This generous support was very welcome, especially as both were also involved in teaching key workers' children at school as well as delivering work packs and even basic writing materials to children without access to online platforms or resources at home. Working together with these colleagues, ASP Coordinator Jeremy Thomas, was able to design tailored lesson plans for school or home, adapted for use with minimal resources, and to share these freely via the ASP's website. Having such a platform, run by the ASP Assistant Megan Milarski, proved essential in this case as it provided a fast and secure way to share resources with users outside the School's own ICT network. As an end user of the resources, Ruth Barnett, at Sunningwell Primary, commented:

'The support and ideas that ASP has provided have been extremely helpful in supporting our staff in this time of lockdown. They have carefully thought through how they can be adapted for use both at home, with parents, as well as in school with a wide age range of Key Worker children. The children have benefited from the practical activities that have been suggested and have had lots of fun.'

The online platform, in addition to membership of the Schools Together network, also facilitated collaboration with the Oundle, Peterborough and East Northants Learning Partnership (OPEN) based at Oundle School and directed by Gordon Montgomery. Gordon's colleague, Stephen Adams, coordinates OPEN's STEM activities and was able to share their own home science resources, developed through collaboration with Imperial College London, via the ASP's website. Resources continue to be developed for the ASP/OPEN Science at Home platform throughout the closure period, including remote GCSE Astronomy lessons for pupils from four schools, and contributions from ASP's team of student Science Ambassadors who had been disappointed by not being able to run their weekly Science Club for primary school children during the summer term. Instead, they turned their efforts to planning a weekly science at home session for sharing with Year 5 and 6 children.

The ability to develop and share resources in such a short space of time and in extraordinary circumstances has been yet another demonstration of the power of sustained partnerships for all involved in these initiatives, both at Abingdon and its partner schools. Lessons are looking to be learnt from the experience of Abingdon Science Partnership to help broaden the range of support available beyond science in the future.