



**JOHN MADEJSKI
ACADEMY**
IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE



**University of
Reading**

A Welcome Home

Feedback report by the Whitley Researchers:

Lorna Zischka, Carla Allamby, Rachel Churchyard, Katherine Cooke, Sonia Duval, Sally Lloyd-Evans, John Ord.



Whitley Big Local
A million pounds for Whitley

Charity Number: 1165275

Welcome Home!

The place: John Madejski Academy

The time: Wednesday 10th May

The task: 1500 giant Lego-type bricks and 6 hours to create a walk-in sit-down home. JMA students were to express the features of 'home' which are important to them in a practical building project.

The people: 8 pupils; Bewley Homes plc (to provide technical support); Whitley Researchers; staff and students from the University of Reading; and a smattering of teachers.

Whitley researchers in collaboration with the University of Reading helped to record the process. We asked questions, took photos and made notes all day, because one thing is to get the job done, and another is to deliberately reflect on the process for future development. This write-up reflects what we saw, and what we thought about the progress of the students.

The enthusiasm

This was a willing team! Everyone wanted to create something amazing. People went the second mile with themed cakes, turning up ahead of time, preparing surveys to take in a wider opinion and making accessories like the glowing tissue-paper fire... with traction like this, we were well set for success!

Practical progress/progress in practice

The initial plan was to build a cottage, *with a fireplace!* The building started with a planning session, drafting out how wide, how long and the height that the house should be. Plans were sketchy however, and being uncertain on how it would all turn out, the plan was pared down to a very simple box room, with mainly the fireplace idea coming through intact. Big plans had to conform to practicalities and simplicity for a first run, with "do-ability" taking precedence over ideals.

The foundation blocks were laid out as a small square, with a door either side, a window in one wall and the fireplace opposite. The truly magnificent fireplace was first thing to be completed, then the doorways, and then students starting randomly filling in the walls from different points. Some adjustments had to be made part way through to get the doorway spacing right, and some of the building was a bit rough and irregular in terms of the way the blocks overlapped. However, the little room was successfully finished in good time. The students took care to finish the doorways and cap the walls with coloured blocks of regular pattern, and put green block 'plants' around the front door.



Having successfully achieved room one, the students got together to plan the next room. Using their experience, they now planned a production line to ensure more regular bricklaying, and set out roles for who makes the room and who makes the furniture. Although these roles and plans were not strictly adhered to in practice, the whole thing blossomed from this point. The next room was much bigger. The building quality was excellent and regular, the colours and patterns perfect. Again, just one window...

Furniture was made in parallel – a TV in each room, a sofa and table/stool, a bed, shower, wardrobe and even a coat stand. The furniture was seen as a very significant part of the home and everyone wanted to be in on building these extras. The enthusiasm for building furniture led to the unplanned re-jigging of roles, not entirely without protest by those being displaced to go work on the walls. Next an outdoor Jacuzzi with steps in and out, a retaining wall, sit down benches inside and brick water, (which passers-by promptly sat in) appeared like magic. A grand front entrance was made, even a stage was built to receive the school choir out the front.

It was interesting to note that the house, furniture, doorways etc. were all built on a slightly smaller scale than full size. The spaces on the couch for example fitted the students but were a squeeze for an adult! Why was that?

It took 2 hours to build the first small room, and one hour more to build everything else – what massive learning and increase in productivity! The project changed a lot from what was expected from the beginning, but what was wanted also evolved along the way. The group said at the end that with the experience now gained, they would have worked differently from the start, but that is learning put by for next time...

As soon as the house was built, it was populated. Full and immediate use was made of the couches, rooms and Jacuzzi by various groups of students.



The backup support from the school

The school wanted to make this happen. The admin staff willingly helped us print off extra papers we needed, the canteen offered us drinks all day, some staff lent a hand and even the Head came by. Everyone did their best to make this work. Not that all the staff involved were sold on the idea from the start, but they believed just enough to give it a go, and their faith was rewarded by the end of the day when they saw how much was achieved. We also note that not everyone needs to be involved to make something happen – a lot can be achieved with the cooperation of a few key people.

Data collection 1: Interviews

We interviewed some of the students through the day, asking questions about what home meant for them, what they thought of the day's building process and aspirations for the future. It was interesting to learn about the people they wanted in their lives, their wishes for some shared and some private personal space, their thoughts on gardens (most wanted their own) and their relation to their neighbours (clear separation, but mostly good to have them around). With no limits, the students had plenty of big ideas for house style, contents, utilities and location. Natural beauty and urban facilities were both appreciated. However we noted the student's understood the need to make choices and set priorities based on budget and possibilities, with a certain amount of flexibility therefore being an asset. All of the students interviewed lived with lots of other people, and some were used to having friends around as well.

We had individual interviews, and also group feedback sessions. Although everybody showed willing to speak up in a group, the feedback from group meetings was often dominated by those quickest to talk, and therefore information which had been shared on a one-to-one basis was not necessarily fed back to the group as a whole. This shows how important different data collection methods are.



Data collection 2: Comments board

Post-it notes were provided for anyone to write a comment on the work at any time, whether student builder, adult or passer-by. The comments before the work began were mainly anticipatory,

about expectations, and afterwards they were very positive. “Looks very beautiful” “Nice work” “Love the hot tub” “I think it’s great” and a selection of smiley’s – these comments were representative. Passers-by generally expressed surprise at how much could be achieved.

The students also prepared surveys for the wider student body, which will broaden their understanding of what people think is important to a home in its various dimensions.



Data collection 3: Emojis

We asked how people felt at different points during the day, both the student builders and the observers, and found a clear pattern of changing emotions emerging through the different stages of the project.

At the beginning people were excited, anticipating something good, but also a bit nervous about the challenge and uncertain of how it was going to go. We note that the boys were more cautious than the girls at this point.

Half way through building the first room there was a greater sense of tension – although some people could see it all beginning to come together, there was also uncertainty about how it would work out. The blocks were not very easy to work with (they were especially hard to get apart) and this was frustrating.

On finishing the first room the overwhelming emoji selected was ‘relief’. Yes, *we could* do it!

And at the end of the day, having blossomed into a wider and successful building spree, the emoji’s were universally satisfied and happy. It feels GOOD to face a challenge and to overcome it!

It is interesting how the emotions of the people doing the work were reflected in the emotions of the people watching it happen as well.

Data collection 4: On camera

Progress through the day was also recorded on camera, in pictures and on film.

The teamwork

Good teamwork was one of the main pleasures of the day – everyone noticed it.

We did not once observe unpleasant words between the team members – in general people listened to one another's suggestions and tried to accommodate everyone.

Although there were a mix of personalities with some people taking a lead more naturally than others, we noticed how the leaders also tried to take on board everyone's opinion. For example, in the decision over the second room, although most people wanted to build a bedroom and only a minority wanted a bathroom, the solution was 'en suite bedroom' which *everyone* could be happy with. So much more inclusive than a straight vote!

Not that it was all easy! Some of the team members were already close friends, which meant they had to work harder to make sure everyone was included in the decision-making and work. Having most people from the same year group and one much older also made a natural barrier that took extra work to overcome. We noticed the students even pulled themselves up when they accidentally made a dismissive comment about someone else's idea, and were making a great effort to work keep the team spirit.

Sometimes we saw people reshaping what someone else had made. There is a delicate balance between 'making things better' (building on and improving an idea) and 'respecting the work of other people'. There were also moments when people tended to go off and do their own thing before being drawn back into the group effort.

Different people in the team had different strengths; some more vocal and up front, some busy organising things in the background, some more creative and practical, some reflective and able to spot weaknesses in good time. Harnessing ALL these different abilities is an important skill to get the most out of a team effort, and in this the students worked well together.



Interaction with others

The students were good at engaging passers-by in the project – telling them what was going on, giving out the freebies and getting them involved via the surveys or via the mini lego-building challenge. The students also took responsibility for their work, asking adults to protect the bricks from being overrun. One surprising thing however was the notice that they put on the front of the house, saying ‘Keep Out – Grrrr’. Given the nature of the project we were rather expecting it to say ‘welcome’ or ‘welcome home’!! The students said it was so that they could ask specific people in and avoid the build getting overcrowded.



It is challenging to cope with every gesture and comment that passers-by might think up to throw out, but the team managed well with a very public display of their work and progress. They also became more confident as the day progressed. The majority of the onlookers seemed intrigued by what was going on. The school choir performed outside the building towards the end of the day, providing a focal point for other students to look the project over.

As regards interaction with adults, students said that adult input was, on the whole, constructive and helpful. The technical advice was useful for good building. Outside input can also be a bit restrictive, dampening creative ideas to conform to standard practice. In getting outside advice there is again selection necessary – taking on board good ideas without being taken over.

Key themes

We note how the surveys designed by pupils reflected 3 key themes which kept reoccurring through the day.

1. the house itself
2. the things in the house
3. the people who populate the house

These 3 elements are what makes a welcome home.

Success

Before this project began we asked ourselves what 'success' would look like, and came up with three things:

- 1) Students enjoy it and want to be involved;
- 2) The school finds it helpful; and
- 3) Students are aspiring.

By this criteria, the project was a success. Students fed back that they found the day 'fun' and were 'proud' and 'pleased' with all they could achieve. They also enjoyed how well they got along together. Teachers were glad to witness the process of students engaging with a problem, drawing on a variety of different skills and resources, overcoming difficulties and seeing the project through to completion. Skills can be learned in this way that complement what is taught in regular classes. The students were all keen for more such projects, trying things they have never done before and also getting more people involved. They were also looking ahead to what more could be done, such as roof, windows, doors...

It was seen that turning ideas into practical realities is not easy and involves an element of compromise, yet this did not hold the students back. Progress was made and can be continually built upon.

The ripple effects

One person commented that this project is like dropping a stone into a pond, with the ripple effects being wider than the project itself.

For example the students now have a series of questionnaires to analyse, which will give them further insights into what people feel is important in a home, and practice in organising and presenting these research findings. A media project is also planned on the back of this programme. A news report is to be written.

It is empowering to create knowledge, and the students involved in this task and experiencing how a difficult task can turn out to be manageable will have learned something of use for the next project. Also people learn in different ways and a project like this can provide ways for productive work and learning that might be easier for some people to engage with than the classroom experience. People flourish best when they find their own niche!

Other students also expressed surprise at what could be achieved, and were interested to join in too. The students were ready to recommend this sort of engagement to others. We hope then that this project will be a springboard for other such events, starting with a photography project around the meaning of 'community' for JMA students. We also have hopes to develop a band of 'Young Whitley Researchers' able to research, understand and influence their own community.

Whitley researchers gained experience too. We learned to be clearer on tasks because non-clarity is intimidating and can lead to a good idea being turned down unnecessarily. Plans should be laid out well in advance, so as to ensure that everyone has time to be clear on the main points. Research is more than gathering and organising answers to questions, it is also about process – creating knowledge.

Bewley Homes were able to witness the skills of JMA students, and are up for offering apprenticeships to students wanting to gain experience in the construction industry.

The building project at JMA demanded a variety of skills, all of which are useful in other domains of life. Although not everything depends on our own efforts (some things are out of our hands), a transfer of the enthusiasm and teamwork witnessed in this project into other areas of life will take students well on the way to success.



Acknowledgements

The project was funded by Reading UKCIC as part of the Whitley for Real partnership with Reading Borough Council. Through it, Whitley residents (as key members of a research team) are able to reflect on their lived experiences of growing up in South Reading and support the developing aspirations of young people.

The Whitley Researchers would like to thank the fantastic students and staff from JMA for their enthusiasm, creativity and making this event possible, Reading UKCIC and Bewley Homes for funding and supporting the project, and staff and students from the University's Participation Lab for their help with organising and photographing the event, especially Shweta Gosh, Sam Poskitt, Abbie Becker and Olivia Cheer.

Further information about the event and the Whitley Researchers can be found on the Participation Lab's website: <https://blogs.reading.ac.uk/participation-lab/the-whitley-researchers-action-research-project-in-reading/>.

