

GEOGRAPHICAL ADVENTURES

JO HODD



Figure 1: Modelling the local area on a large-scale map. Photo © Jo Hodd.

'Creative teachers recognise that children's emotional well-being can be enhanced through high-quality outdoor play' (Witt, 2013). In this article Jo introduces us to exciting opportunities for outdoor exploration in the early years.

Young children are naturally curious geographers as they playfully explore their world, so I decided to explore the possibilities of geographical experience with 3-4 year-olds within an early years setting.

Voyages into the unknown

Play in a variety of contexts is central to young children's geographical learning (Bruce, 2005). It encourages them to actively engage with their local environment in multi-sensory ways in order to develop a sense of place. Within my setting (a pre-school) we provide pupils with items to encourage this exploration. These include binoculars and magnifying glasses to facilitate observation, and large ears to encourage pupils to carefully listen to everyday sounds. My pupils have a well-loved boat, which provides hours of fun and opportunities to use geographical imaginations and travel the world.



Figure 2: Putting themselves into the model – the pupils' personalised Duplo figures. Photo © Jo Hodd.

Play is child-initiated and generates valuable talk about places. The following conversation demonstrates the potential power of a plastic boat to stimulate adventures to faraway lands...

Child A: 'We're just going to an island.'

Child B: 'Pirates of the Caribbean land?'

Child C: 'No fairy land!'

Child B: 'No, it's a pirate ship!'

Child A: 'Pirate Island, it's at the South Pole'

Child C: 'No it's too far, we can't get there. We'll go to fairy land. I know I'll drive us there'

[Children pretend to steer the boat to fairy land.]

Child C: 'I see the fairies!'

Child B: 'Can I put shorts on? The fairies have shorts on.'

Child A: 'Look there's bumblebees!'

Child C: 'There's sand and grass!'

Adult: 'So where do the fairies live?'

Child B: 'A purple castle!'

Child A: 'No, houses made of grey, pink and yellow'

Local journeys

Young children should be given opportunities for play involving modelling and place-making that symbolises and represents the world around them (Catling, 2006) and which helps them develop position and orientation skills to aid their understanding of place (Martin, 1995). The pupils and I co-constructed our village on a large-scale map outdoors (Figure 1). Photographs of real places were attached to a variety of boxes and used to prompt talk about these local features. The pupils were very excited when identifying places that they knew, revealing connections to the neighbourhood, for example, 'they're my shops!'. Toy cars, buses and other small-world play resources were provided and the pupils had fun 'playing' and mark-making on their map. Photographs of the pupils were placed onto Duplo figures to encourage them to explore personal geographies in their local area (Figure 2). The pupils relished the chance to use positional language, re-live experiences and share their emerging understanding of the world.

Reflection

Through playful experiences that provide opportunities for talk, learning outdoors and sensory exploration, this knowledge can be built upon in key stage 1 to provide the foundations for a lifelong enthusiasm and passion for the world in which they live.

References

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