

Using role-play to develop young children's understanding of the past

Lisa MacGregor

Unknown, interesting artefacts can really capture a child's enthusiasm for learning. In the Foundation Stage, children want to use all their senses to explore and play with objects, and so the planning of practical, hands-on activities is important.

The following activities were completed by Reception children in a large inner-city primary school in the west end of Newcastle upon Tyne. The specific artefacts were chosen as the children could both interact with them and make links to their own everyday life.

Using the senses to explore artefacts

Sometimes allowing children to touch and hold valuable artefacts can be risky, in case they get broken or damaged and cannot be replaced. If the artefact is too precious, it is preferable not to tempt children with it. There are museums where you can take children to look at those kinds of artefacts; the classroom is where hands-on experiences should occur.

The artefacts chosen to pass around in a small group were: a wash-board, a dolly peg, some old soap and a scrubbing-brush. These were chosen as the children were going to actually use them in the next activity and would be able to create links to everyday activities. They were also interesting to look at, feel and smell. There was lots of discussion describing what the artefacts were made out of, particularly how heavy the wash-



board was, as the artefacts were passed around the circle.

When describing the wash-board, which was made out of wood and glass, Child A suggested the glass was 'plastic' originally, then other children corrected them by saying it was made out of glass. Child B commented further: 'If you drop it down now, does the glass not break?' This demonstrates children questioning what they are hearing and a good understanding of the properties of different materials.

Child C used their senses to describe it, stating that it was 'bumpy, stripy and woody'. Child D developed this, using time-related vocabulary for their description: 'It's from the old times because it is dark and heavy.' Suggestions were made that the wash-board was for 'kitchens' and it was either an 'oven' or a 'drawer'

and one child recognised that they had seen it before and said: 'When the clothes is dirty you scrub it, then you wash it.'

Alongside investigating the artefacts, a range of photographs were explored and discussed. Some of the photographs were of the artefacts being used in kitchens in the past and some were photographs of artefacts used in the present day. Links were made to washing clothes now, using a washing machine.

It is important to use a range of different sources in order to strengthen learning links: having an actual wash-board to touch, alongside a photograph of it in an old kitchen and a book with information about it, gives three separate sources of evidence to a child. In this example, different

Washing with a washboard and dollypeg.



senses are used for each of the sources: what a wash-board is, what it looks, feels and smells like, how it was used in the past and what do we use now to wash our clothes.

Using artefacts to recreate how they were used in the past

Two separate activities were set up to demonstrate how the artefacts were used. This allowed the children to experience and empathise with what it would have been like to wash clothes in the past, compared to simply putting dirty laundry in a washing machine today. There are clear links to the Characteristics of Effective Learning from this hands on activity.

The washboard and the soap were put in the water tray with some dolls' clothes to wash. The dolly peg and some grated soap were placed in the baby bath with some dolls' clothes to clean. As this was planned for a small focused group, the children were able to take turns for each activity.

Having the focus of cleaning the dolls' clothes gave the activities real purpose. Child E said about the wash-board, *'It's really bumpy*

because you need to rub it.' As the children were using the artefacts, they were able to talk about what was happening. Child E said: *'The clothes are so heavy because they've got too much water.'*

The books containing the photographs were left next to the water activities, so that the children could look at them in between the activities, if they chose to. A small group of three girls flicked through them, pointing out to each other the photographs which contained the artefacts. This also led to further discussion about the photographs and pictures of old kitchens; how they were different to their own kitchens and what they recognised in them, for example, an old cooker.

Comparing artefacts with their modern-day items

The third activity was planned to help the children make connections between the past and the present, exploring continuity and change, alongside similarity and difference. The activity was again completed in a small group with the children sitting in a circle on the ground.

The first artefact passed around was a Victorian iron, to which

Recognising a Victorian iron.



Recognising an earthenware hot water bottle.



a child immediately said: 'You iron clothes with it, it's from the old days.' I asked if it was like the iron they had at home, to which the same child said that there were 'no buttons on the iron, it is heavy, it is black. Now they are purple and white or blue and white.' I then passed around a new iron and one child commented that 'it's not heavy it's light; it has a plug.' 'How did they use the iron in the old days if they didn't have any electric?' was a further question.

Further descriptions were: 'no holes under the old one; no holes for water,' 'the shape is similar; old and new' and, after being told how the Victorians heated up the iron: 'What if the clothes burnt if the iron was really hot?'

The second artefact passed around was an old earthenware hot-water bottle. Lots of the children suggested it was a bottle and pretended to drink from it from the middle of the bottle. One child commented: 'That's like a milk bottle, it's heavy, it's like a treasure box.' Another different, but interesting idea was: 'I think maybe you put honey in it.' A few of the children had not seen a modern hot water bottle before and their peers were able to explain what it was used for and when they had used it.

Using artefacts in the early years allows children to experience and recreate events from the past and also to make links to their own lives. These activities showed that children were able to use a rich array of historical vocabulary, including time-related words.

The key to planning similar activities is ensuring that the artefacts can be handled and ideally used to role-play how they were used in the past. For example, using old, wooden spoons and bowls in a role-play castle or a typewriter in a writing area. This leads to deep and purposeful learning experiences.

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Links to the Characteristics of Effective Learning

Playing and exploring: 'Showing curiosity about objects' and 'Using senses to explore'.

Active learning: 'Maintaining focus on their activity for a period of time'.

Creating and thinking critically: 'Making links and noticing patterns in their experience'.

Links to the Development Matters

Communication and language:

Listening and attention: 'Children respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions.'

Understanding: 'Children answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences.'

Speaking: 'Children use past, present and future forms' and 'they develop their own explanations by connecting ideas or events.'

Mathematics: *Shape, space and measure:* 'Children use everyday language to explore time.'

Understanding the world: *People and communities:* 'Children talk about past and present events. They know about similarities and differences.'



Resources

Artefacts: wash-board, dolly peg, soap, scrubbing brush, Victorian iron, Victorian hot-water bottle.

Other items: water tray, modern iron, modern hot water bottle, children's reference books.

Early Education (2012) *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage*, London: Early Education