

Exploring the past through active enquiry

Karin Doull

Story and enquiry – that’s what I think of when considering history. The stories of events and people pull you into the past and stories generate a curiosity that encourages exploration. ‘Finding out’ is central to what we do in history. Our early-years classrooms must provide vibrant and challenging environments for our youngest children to investigate.

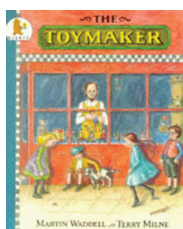
Story

The EYFS framework highlights the importance of story within the early learning goal for Past and Present:

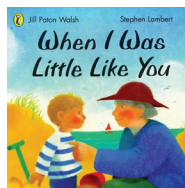
Understand the past through settings, characters and events encountered in books read in class and storytelling.

(DfE 2021:14)

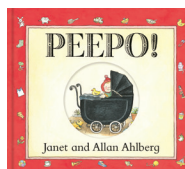
Certainly there are a range of stories set in the past that can begin to help children begin to explore this concept of ‘past’.



The Toymaker by Martin Waddell allows us to look at an old-fashioned toy shop and contrast it with what we might see today.



When I Was Little Like You by Jill Paton Walsh and Stephen Lambert focuses on contrasts in the environment.



Peepo! by Janet and Alan Ahlberg gives us a child’s eye view of a wartime family.

The strength of all three books lies in their illustrations. They provide us with rich images to discuss with the children, allowing us to focus on guiding children to ‘know some similarities and differences between things in the past and now’.

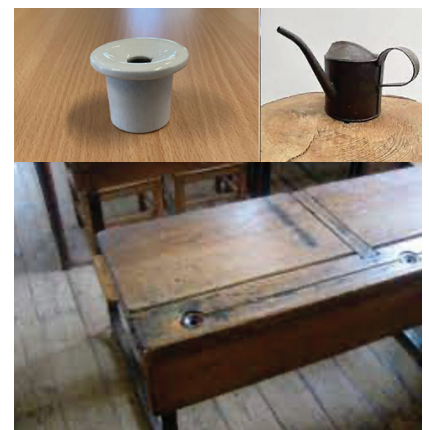
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Artefacts

We should also encourage children to explore the past through investigating real objects. Local museums or libraries may have handling collections or boxes. It is also possible to build up a small collection of artefacts through boot fairs or Ebay/Esty.

Original artefacts provide full scope for children’s curiosity, allowing them to use their senses to

investigate the objects. We want to encourage them to tell us what they think about the object in discussion with us and other children. It may be that what they ‘guess’ about what they see is wrong, perhaps because of their immaturity or limited experience, but that is not an issue. Telling us what they think and explaining why they think this, listening to others and becoming aware that there are perhaps no ‘right’ answers, is important historical learning. (Cooper 2005)



Inkwell, a can for filling the inkwell and a desk with inkwell

The unexpected mystery object

The most apparently mundane or boring objects can stimulate



discussion. Sometimes we encounter unexpected suggestions from simple artefacts. Because we know the function of the object we can be surprised by the children's observations. What looks like a rather boring item can lead us into some real historical discussions.

In looking at the inkwell with children however they found the object curious, because they had no idea what it was.

'I think it is for holding something because it has got a hole.'

'I think it needs a top or something to put in the hole to stop stuff from coming out.'

'I think it [what was inside] is expensive because it is small.'

Below are some of the artefacts that we have. Domestic items are best because they also allow children to have some points of reference and they can provide them with examples of similarities

and differences. You should help children to handle artefacts carefully by modelling with an example. Don't use any that are particularly precious – they are the ones that always get broken. Looking at them around a table means there is less chance of them falling and smashing if little hands slip. This could also be done in a circle on the carpet.

Allow them to touch the objects

- What does it feel like?
- Is it smooth or rough?
- Is it hot or cold?
- Is it heavy or light?
- Why do you think it feels like this?
- What is it made of and how do you know / why do you think that?

Let children explore the objects using their senses, listening to the sound it makes when you tap it (what does that tell you?), seeing

what happens with wheels and dials if they are pushed or turned. Does it have a particular smell?

Children share their ideas with support and modelling from their teacher, and sensitive questioning that invites them to elaborate their ideas.

What are the objects used for?

Ask the children to compare and contrast the objects at hand with modern day equivalents and have relevant modern objects for them to make these comparisons.

What would it be like to use these objects?

Which objects would they like to use and why? Which do they think are best and why?

Conversations round a stone hot-water bottle:

'It's for carrying something ... it's got a lid so that's to keep

something in...it's very heavy. I think you pour water in the hole...'

You could follow this up with some close observational drawing, getting children to look carefully and focus on details. These could be displayed with some of their comments in speech bubbles.

What room do they belong in?

Talk about where we might find the different objects around the house. Most homes with a rotary phone (ours is a bit bashed) had only one in the hall of the house. You often had to have a conversation sitting on the stairs. We had a bright red one with a very long lead so that my sister could listen in her bedroom without anyone else hearing! Where might you use a storm lantern? Is this an inside or outside object? Where would you listen to your portable radio?

Take photos of your objects and create small laminated cards. Draw a plan of a house and label rooms. Ask children to show you what rooms the pictures belong in and explain why they think this. Alternatively



children could add these to the relevant rooms in the small world house.

Cooper, H. (2005) *Exploring Time and Place Through Play: Foundation Stage – Key Stage 1*, Abingdon: David Fulton

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Living room	Hall	Kitchen
Bedroom 	Outside /Garden	Bathroom