

Critically evaluate the importance of active learning as an approach to planning & Teaching the foundation curriculum subjects.

As we enter a new and exciting time in education it is a time to reflect on recent change & reform within the education sector. In 1989 a shock wave was felt throughout schools with the introduction of the National Curriculum, this "marked a major change from the freedom to prescription in curriculum content, and from topics to subject-based teaching." ((Turner-Bisset, 2005, Pg.17) As a result of this change teachers began to feel pressurised to teach the exact content described within the curriculum, teaching became very formal in order to attain targets and the appropriate levels, this meant teaching in some cases lost its creativity. In 2000 the Foundation Stage Document was published, the ethos of this document placing the emphasis on learning through play. A view supported by theorists such as Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky, Curtis & O'Hagan, (2003) state in their book *Care and Education in Early Childhood...*"he (Piaget) argued that children are active learners" Susan Isaacs (1929) also wrote that "play indeed is the child's work and the means by the way he or she develops and learns." However this principle of children learning through play was not continued throughout the primary curriculum. Indeed in contrast rather than the foundation stage setting the benchmark, primary education at that time seemed to work in reverse order; filtering down from year six to year one. Rather than building on the hands on approach featured within the foundation stage, teachers felt a pressure to prepare children for the standardised tests which they would face at the end of year 2. This led to in some cases, a large contrast in the teaching styles once out of reception. Children in year 1 found themselves completing endless worksheets and topics books in order to fill curriculum requirements and provide evidence for parents, heads and Ofsted inspections. 2003 saw the introduction of the National Primary Strategy document *Excellence and Enjoyment*, which "...suggests a relaxation of prescription, increased teacher autonomy on curriculum content & pedagogy, & the restoration of a broad & balanced curriculum." (Turner, 2005, Pg.17)

The foundation subjects have always given teachers the possibility to create lessons which are interesting, creative and interactive. Indeed these are the principles that underline all the foundation subjects. As an ASEY trainee the importance of a "hands on" practical approach to learning is particularly valued. Geography is a subject which embraces this ethos, no more so than in outdoor activities and fieldwork. When children interact with the world around them it gives them the opportunity to put the concepts and knowledge that they already had and those that they have learned into a real context. Although secondary resources are now so advanced they are still no substitute for experiencing the real thing. Such simple things as snow cannot be experienced even through a live webcam to Antarctica! However it should be considered that some things are out of a teacher's control. Nevertheless teacher's working in the new mould of active learning would take the opportunity to use the outdoor classroom and when such opportunities as snow arise would utilise this excellent resource as a learning tool. To get a real feeling of what snow is or looks like children need to see, touch and experience it first hand.

Fieldwork is one of the ways that makes geography such an active subject, this may consist of a trip involving the hire of transportation etc or may simply be a tour of the school grounds, haven being given a specific activity or focus. Fieldwork develops general learning skills such as; observational skills, recording data and collaborative work to name a few. It also links with all six areas of the foundation stage and most areas of the National Curriculum, it, is therefore an invaluable teaching tool. There however some important things to remember when planning a field trip, no matter how large or small a scale it may be on. Risk assessment, parental consent and careful planning are just a few things to take into consideration. Checklists are available to use and these procedures should not discourage any teacher or practitioner from undertaking field work, David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, said,

"Outdoor activities both at school and on residential courses enable pupils to enjoy challenging and unfamiliar experiences that test and develop their physical, social and personal skills. They can be among the most memorable experiences for pupils of their school days."

However active learning is not just about field trips, active learning is about learning by doing (Gibbs, 1988). It involves a student-focused approach (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). There is considerable evidence that well-designed active learning is an effective way of student learning (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003). 'Good practice uses active learning techniques' (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, pg.3). However, as Ramsden (2003, pg.113) notes, 'Student activity does not itself imply that learning will take place.' For Gibbs (1988, pg.9), 'It is not enough just to do, and neither is it enough just to think. Nor is it enough simply to do and think. Learning from experience must involve linking the doing and the thinking.'

When trying to teach map reading & co-ordinate skills why not present this learning in a practical activity? Give children a map to read and places to find on the school grounds. Give them a camera, ask them to take photos of significant places or objects, why did they choose that object or place? Develop their learning by continuing to pose more questions about the places they went to. Why was that there, what was its purpose? In making this type of activity active the learning opportunities are greatly increased, cross curricular links are made and the children will benefit. They can see that they are using the skills they are being taught and therefore learning has a meaning and a purpose. In contrast, using a non active learning approach, children may be given a map and a set of questions: what is in b 7? Conversely in this type of approach the learning is very one dimensional, although

there are links to mathematical development, this, is only due to the subject matter not the teaching method as in the previously mentioned active learning approach.

The very nature of active learning lends itself to the unknown quantity; children will often take something from the activity that was not planned for, however it is these moments which children really benefit from, these types of opportunities are often when children are making sense of learning which has previously occurred. In Piaget's terms this fits in to the assimilation and adaptation process found in his schema theory, adaptation takes place as people are driven by the urge to have things "fit together" or to be in what Piaget calls "equilibrium". (Curtis & O'Hagan 2003) "Schema theory would indicate that we need to provide a range of activities which allow children to work.... in very active ways, not merely reading words on a page, but engaging physically, mentally & emotionally with facts, concepts, skills and processes to make the new material part of their mental map of the world" (Turner-Bisset, 2005, pg.25)

History is a subject that is often very closely linked with geography. Topics such as sea sides past and present lend themselves to cross curricular links between the two subjects. However traditionally history is a subject that may be deemed as 'dull' or 'boring' but in fact this highlights the need for an active approach when teaching the subject. History demands that this approach to learning is used in order to encourage learning by making it an exciting subject where children begin to make sense of the past and present. Too often schools stick rigidly to the topics suggested in the curriculum or QCA schemes of work. It should be pointed out that this is not always a bad thing but teachers should utilise their creative license to bring these topic alive. Otherwise as Turner-Bisset (2005 pg.18) states

"History at worst can become the meaningless copying out of information from topic books, & the production of pleasing work & artefacts for display. Of course children will learn something.... but they will be deprived of a full understanding."

An active learning approach to teaching history makes learning real and this should start as early as the foundation stage. History at this level may only be looking at the day or week before, or toys that they have owned since an early age. As with all subjects the starting point with any topic should be what the children already know, these ideas should then be used as the foundation to their learning, it also gives the teacher the opportunity to identify any common miss-conceptions the children may have.

During a recent teaching practice in a reception class, a history lesson was planned and implemented. Children were asked to bring in something that reminded them of their earliest memory and if possible a photograph with the item. The class had a discussion and the children brought their artefacts and photographs in. Children were given the opportunity during circle time to tell the class, what they had chosen and what it meant to them. Through this activity children were not only discovering history but also expressing feelings and emotions. With permission from parents the items were used to create a memory quilt display, with photographs and labels explaining who it was with which item. Children took real ownership of this display and every visitor that entered the class would ask about it and the children would be the ones who answered. From this activity children had learned a whole range of historical vocabulary but rather than just learning it they were using it, putting it into context. They had begun to understand the concept of the past and this had led to conversations about the past beyond living memory.

"Rather than children studying history as do professional historians we can try to engage children in tasks which see them acting as historians" (Turner-Bisset, 2005, p.21).

Although children were not physically active during this activity active learning was still taking place. It is imperative to remember that this approach is about getting children actively involved in a subject not necessarily being physically active.

Other activities such as evidence bags, bringing in artefacts, visitors and using photographs are all methods which involve the children. By using activities such as this children develop their historical skills but in a creative and interesting way. Children may be given an evidence bag and asked to decipher the information, what are the clues telling us and how do they know this? This type of activity has been observed in settings and the result is children who are engaged in an activity wanting to find out more, wanting to know if they are right. Children who are engaged and focused learn more, the children around them do too and behaviour management issues are less frequent. Active learning is a key approach to teaching.

In an education system that is still dominated by testing it is an important step that the government have taken to produce a document such as Excellence and Enjoyment (2003) which clearly states,

"We want schools to continue to focus on raising standards while not being afraid to combine that with making learning fun. Our goal is for every primary school to combine excellence in teaching with enjoyment of learning."

The foundation stage got this right in 2000 and now the ethos of this document is being echoed throughout the curriculum, of course there is still a time, place and need to record evidence but this can be done in a fun and interactive way. As Turner-Bisset (2005, pg.19) points out

"There is the ubiquitous 'research' or 'finding out' from topic books, encyclopaedias, CD-ROMS & the internet, which is not genuine enquiry, being rarely fuelled by questions." He goes on to say "More often it is guided by a general instruction to 'find out about' & can lead to copying of information... cutting & pasting to produce writing, which contains nothing of the child's understanding."

Even when assessing children through summative assessments it is still possible to use an active learning approach. Whilst assessing children's addition skills on teaching practice a sand sorting game was devised. Children had to find the sums buried in the sand and place them in the appropriate answer bucket, this was done under observation and a summative assessment was carried out, but instead of giving the child a standardised test, some fun and active participation was added.

However active learning should not be the only approach used in schools, it is important to cater for children's differing learning styles, indeed it has been observed children who thrive off worksheets but this was a minority. It is essential to remember that, "In order to teach anything to anyone, one needs a broad pedagogical repertoire." (Turner-Bisset, 2005, pg.28) Excellence and Enjoyment (2003) has taken this idea on board, teachers must use a variety of approaches and styles to capture and stimulate children's imaginations. Children have so much energy and passion that is important teachers harness this spirit and use it to their advantage in the classroom. In the foreword of the document Charles Clarke (2003) writes,

"Children learn better when they are excited and engaged - but what excites and engages them best is truly excellent teaching, which challenges them and shows them what they can do. When there is joy in what they are doing, they learn to love learning.

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