

THE HISTORY AROUND US

LOCAL HISTORY

— Sue Temple

Introduction

History is an important aspect of the development of even very young children. They need to begin to develop the foundations of an understanding of the past and how it has developed and affected our present. In order to engage these children it is essential to use aspects that they can relate to – the streets and town where they live, their own families, schools and familiar buildings, e.g. local churches, castles or historic houses and museums.

Children need these experiences to develop relevant language; for example, how many of us have been asked “how many ‘sleeps’ to my birthday?”! Our current National Curriculum offers many opportunities to incorporate these kinds of experiences throughout the foundation stage and Key Stage 1. We need to ensure these experiences with their environmental and heritage perspectives are not lost in any revision of the curriculum.

Local history and geography

Active learning: exploration, historical sources, oral testimony

These kinds of activities can be combined with the geography unit on Our Local Area to create a meaningful and valuable approach, using the best aspects of these two subjects. As well as exploring the local streets and businesses and how they have developed and grown using old and contemporary maps and interviewing local people the children can examine Trade Directories and census returns. This will enable them to begin to understand what was there in the past and why; and how that past has developed into the present that they are more familiar with.

The immediate environment: buildings

Using familiar local buildings can be particularly beneficial for children as they are able to relate to them much more easily than famous buildings which are just two-dimensional pictures on a page. It is also much easier to organise visits and enable the children to explore the buildings for themselves if a local landmark or street is used. Working outside the classroom in this way captures the children’s enthusiasm and curiosity much more too.

Project work: trails and visiting

In order for my trainees to develop an understanding of how to approach Local History I organise a project with one of our local schools as part of their first module. In previous years this has included the trainees taking small groups of children on a local trail around the immediate environment of the school. We have used a variety of small village schools for this.

Carlisle Castle – focus

However last year we decided to work with Stanwix Primary School, which is in the city, and use Carlisle Castle as the focus. The project had several aspects:

- 1 The trainees had a guided tour and examined the Castle – many are from out of Cumbria and so were not familiar with this local landmark. This was to illustrate how important a pre-visit for the teacher is.
- 2 Trainees and children had a morning together in the classroom working on pre-trip activities devised by the trainees. This enabled the trainees to have a better grasp of the children’s abilities and meant they knew their group’s names prior to the trip.
- 3 Trainees then took the children for a morning of activities at the Castle. The class teachers and I were also available on site in case of any emergency. Carlisle Castle is owned and run by English Heritage so these visits were all free under their Education Programme; and the Castle is within walking distance of the school so no transport costs were incurred. Each group of trainees had organised different activities for their group of children so there was lots for the teachers to talk about with them on their return to school.
- 4 Back at the University the students were then encouraged to reflect on the whole experience of the project and their assessment is a presentation of their reflections – what worked well and anything they would do differently. The trainees are encouraged to use their own reflections and last year we also incorporated the children’s views which were very mature and insightful! The class teachers are encouraged to attend the presentations too.

Although many of the children had visited the Castle before their evaluations showed clearly that in the majority of cases they had discovered new things and developed new understandings and concepts about the Castle and its history. This project would be relatively easy to replicate with any local teacher training organisation and school working in partnership, so do give it a try!

Conclusion

We should not be afraid to use familiar buildings thinking that the children know all there is to know about these places – in fact that very familiarity can be used as a foundation to build on. In some cases misconceptions can also have grown up, so teachers are able to address these. Starting from the familiar and building on these foundations is what primary teachers do and should continue to do. History is no different from other subjects in this sense and what is in the children’s immediate environment, their families and schools, provide ideal resources for doing just this.

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