

First hand experiences by Diane Rich

Allowing children to engage with the natural world first hand will take their learning to new heights

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There are many television documentaries showing how to travel the world in different ways, to different places. Most people families enjoy watching and being part of the experience from the comfort of their own homes but of course, there is no substitute for the real thing. The places people travel to, the things they see along the way, the glimpses into past, present and future worlds, are testimony to the fact that experiencing the world for oneself - seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and feeling is important for everyone, including children.

When today's young children grow up, it will become ever more possible for them to travel the world in 80 days, move from pole to pole or motor bike from east to west. But children don't have to travel far to find a rich world right in front of them; a world that is worthy of exploration here and now.

Appreciate your surroundings

Whether growing up in a rural or urban environment there is much to wonder at and explore first hand in every community. In fact, young children are expert, intrepid and great explorers of their worlds. They are active, excited and very curious about everything and everybody around them. From an early age, and throughout their school lives, children need to be encouraged to engage with the world, using all of their senses in order to fully enjoy all that it has to offer. They need to make sense of the important role they play in making the world a better place for themselves and future generations.

Sadly, more and more, children's explorations are confined to secondary sources like television, DVD, and computers. The world readily comes to children without them engaging with it or really getting a true sense of being an important part of it. Of course, it is possible to learn something about, for example, forests from television, the internet, or even a song, without ever visiting a forest. How much better though to hear for oneself the sounds of a

forest? How much richer children's understanding, empathy and tolerance of others can be, if they experience things first hand for themselves. Findings from a recent study of children's experiences in Reception classes (*Inside the Foundation Stage* by Adams et al 2004) published by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), conclude that there is an urgent need to reinstate first hand experience as a core element of every child's entitlement in early childhood education settings.

Tackling the wider issue

The problem is not just restricted to schools settings. Many family holidays involve visits to manufactured commercial theme parks where children get stimulation and enjoyment, not from the beauty of the natural world, but instead from adrenalin-generating rides and computer images and games.

A family visited me recently with children aged three, seven and ten. On a country walk mobile phones became distractions from the world at hand. The father walked along texting friends while the eldest son complained that he wanted to stay at home playing his computer games. Their real world had been replaced with screen-generated entertainments.

Due to such pressures, educators are finding it more difficult to take into account the everyday extraordinary enquiries of children engaged with the real world: 'Is there really an ocean inside every shell?' 'Does rain always fall down?' 'Why can you see through glass?' 'If I wear a monster's hat am I still really me, or a monster?'

The questions of children, and the ways in which they make sense of the world, are enriched by first hand experiences. One educator, involved in a first hand experience project conducted by myself and other consultants, reported that following regular walks around their local environments children noticed and questioned many features of the world around them. They noticed, for

example, that windows and doors were different in many ways. One child became fascinated with door furniture and others theorised about differences between windows and doors. (A full account of this story can be found in 'First hand experience: what matters to children' by Diane Rich et al, 2005).

Finding out for themselves

Children naturally want to know more about the places and the people in their world. They want to know how dangerous there might be and how far they can safely go in their risk taking. They consider, what is in their world and, who is in their world - wherever they might be. They also want to find things out for themselves and 'have a go'. First hand experience is what matters to us all - and really matters to children because it is the starting point for their life long exploratory journey.

Explorers are supported by a team when they travel. Similarly, a child's journey through the world needs support from others. For this reason, all educators have a key role to play as part of the team supporting children. They can make a difference by ensuring that children have quality first hand experiences and that these are highly valued by parents and the wider community.

*The book **First hand experience: what matters to children** aims to bring the real world back into children's lives and learning. It takes the form of an alphabet of real experiences. The book will be very useful for all those who work with children aged 3-8 and beyond as well as parents too. Each page has been developed as a springboard from which children and adults can launch themselves into the beautiful, mysterious, physical world in which we all live. The authors are a group of consultants and researchers who have, for many years, been concerned about the quality of children's first hand experiences in schools and pre-schools.*

First hand experience: what matters to children by Diane Rich, Denise Casanova, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Andrea Durrant, and Cathy Myer is published by Rich Learning Opportunities and is available from www.richlearningopportunities.co.uk
The book is dedicated to Annabelle Dixon who died while the book was in press.