

Long Live Fieldwork!

The importance of fieldwork for early years and primary pupils

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Fieldwork is an important and magical part of work in geography. Going outside the classroom whether to get wet in the rain, go to a restaurant to see how pizzas are made or visit a farm, brings home to youngsters the reality of our world through first hand experience. It provides that much needed different perspective on every day things and challenges them to develop and use a whole range of new skills which otherwise might never see the light of day! It is also important that pupils are exposed to more than just the local area, important though that is. Have you ever thought that a contrasting area might just exist on the other side of your town for example?

In order for this real enquiry experience to take place it needs to be recognised that the 'answers' may not be known before the fieldwork takes place. The responses to the pupils' questions, the picture of the location, the measurements taken or the feelings encountered can be predicted but never totally known. This is the wonderful thing about fieldwork – it is what is found, seen or felt at that particular time that matters. It is a snapshot of a moment in the real world. This of course is often difficult for us to live with, let alone work with. We live in a life of predictable objectives, targets and outcomes, but we have to help children understand that what they find out, remains what 'it is like' at that particular moment. Next week it could be different. That makes doing fieldwork in the same place at a different time of day or year interesting. This is the spirit of finding out, the practical reality to compare with the theory we started with:

- *How do the results or findings compare with a previous visit?*
- *What is our view about what we have seen or found?*
- *Can we predict the future – how might this place change over time?*

Fieldwork is recognised by us all as a vital part of the teaching of geography at all levels. There is a need for students to see the real world outside the classroom and to have the chance to try out ideas and investigate the world around them. Exposure to television, advertising and modern travel has extended pupils' awareness of other places and environments, but nevertheless they may remain unobservant, uncritical and unchallenged. Often they make little use of their experiences in their local area to really understand why things are as they are.

The opportunities to have out of classroom experiences are therefore, all the more important as the pupils move through their school years. The challenge for the teacher is how to include these visits within the frameworks of the health and safety issues and risk assessments which exist in schools today.

So what needs to be done in order to make fieldwork a more attractive option for teachers to undertake?

- Teachers need to feel secure that if they plan it well, observe safety rules and take good care of the pupils, they will be protected from undue stress and worries about facing legal action.
- Going out needs some reorganisation of school time and teachers need to feel that they can work with colleagues to supervise those going on the visit *and* to care for their classes which need cover back at school. Any future workload agreements need to recognise that these situations will have to be addressed.
- Out of school visits are part of the learning process and need to be planned throughout a pupil's career – they are not 'add-ons' to be carried out at the end of the summer term when all the important stuff has been completed. If we are serious about the value of real world learning this integration into the curriculum is vital.
- Teachers need to have their commitment to helping pupils to have their first hand experiences recognised. Taking a class out is not a 'jolly' but very hard work requiring vigilance at all times.
- Risk Assessment needs to be a manageable exercise, which is 'fit for purpose', not one which bows teachers down to the point they give up! How ever did we manage before Risk Assessment became such a highlight of our work?
- There should be recognition that youngsters need to experience the 'far' as well as the 'near' if we are to challenge them and give them a new view on the world. A residential experience, even for one night, opens their eyes to a new world.

Is it all worthwhile you may ask? I can tell you the proof lies in the pudding. Having recently returned from taking Year 6 on a week long residential visit to the Forest Of Dean, I can vouch for the hard work needed but also the rewards of hearing what the pupils really enjoyed – 'the night walk in the woods', 'the high bridge crossing the River Wye', 'the Peregrines on Symond's Yat', 'the hand operated ferry' ... and so on.

Peregrines you say, where on earth are they in the National Curriculum? I can tell you, they are in the little piece of magic those youngsters will carry with them for the rest of their lives!

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