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“Recently I decided to start something new...”

Wandering and Wondering

Gerry Winnall teaches in Exeter. Her fresh idea for wise learning with her 5-6 year olds will challenge anyone in danger of sinking beneath the wave of targets in education.

Every morning straight after the register the children are experiencing a “nature walk”.

Although it isn't really a walk at all. I called it a walk initially because I wanted the children to walk in silence, but actually our playground is very small and it is more of an aimless wander and sit down if you want to, kind of time. It is a time for *being*. A *sanctuary* in a curriculum very much orientated to measured outcomes and targets for achievement. In my planning I call the time “A quiet time to notice nature” and link it with science and the seasons.

However, there is no doubt that it is a rich time for the spiritual development of the child. The phrase “the whole child is still here” regularly echoes in my mind amidst the numeracy and literacy biased curriculum.

Now my start to the day is wonderful, and being outside is as beneficial for me as the children. I find it very centering; a time when I can arrive and ‘still’ myself in school. The day begins in a place where all the children start and finish an activity as equals. Allowing an experience of a different kind, sitting next to each other on a bench in easy silence. Sharing the witness of the wing span of a seagull or pigeon fly high above their heads. The blossom falling from the cherry tree. You may be thinking that our playground has luscious fields, allotments,

chickens and flowers, but you would be mistaken; this is an inner city school with no grass, just a playground and some (I am embarrassed to say), sad looking borders.

The French painter Camille Pissarro once said “*Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing*”

The children wander and relax and point to birds and leaves and other things they find interesting, one child determinedly took me to see where the wood lice lived - in the bark of a tree and in a wall on the opposite side of the playground - which he had found during play times.

Sometimes it is raining and we go under the canopy and watch the rain. I do model what to look for; sometimes before we go out, or in a quiet voice outside, I ask: “Which way is the rain going?” “What is happening to the rain on the ground?” “Can you see rain?” “What colour is it?” “Are all the clouds joined together?”

The children are more chatty sometimes, but of course this is normal for humans, let only children who are 5 and 6! So I try to let them be and gently encourage silence. They are growing in the understanding that more can be heard and seen in quiet. However, one day, after the children were more restless, I suggested before we went out, that they found a place to stand on their own, so they weren't so tempted to chat or run. The next day they simply asked “Are we going to stand in our own place?” And I was able to say ‘no, we can be quiet together and we don't always have to stand on our own’. There is something lovely about watching the children sit quietly on the bench together looking

around or just relaxing. The children have never said they don't want to go out and get up quickly to get ready to line up for our walk.

Today was the first day back after half term, and for a fleeting moment I thought: should I keep going with this? But I have begun to see it as a habit we are cultivating and it was a wonderful surprise to all of us to find small apples on the tree, I mean how amazing! We also found a large branch had been broken off. How might that have happened? What could it mean to the tree?

One morning after returning inside I laid out some blossom shapes in tissue paper, some green leaves, and white bird shapes, for the children to write what they liked about the quiet time and how it made them feel. Many said it made them feel happy, and all were able to reflect positively on the time.

I have had so many realisations from this time. *"All the world in a grain of sand"* has really resonated with me as I too have found so much beauty in an environment I always previously felt was deprived.

With nature, it is not 'how much' but 'how attentive' that reveals beauty.

We went to the farm recently and the farm leader took on my quiet time suggestion. All the children walked silently into a tree henge and sat on logs around the fire. We listened and watched the fire start, and the leader went on to tell the story of how a phoenix rose from the ashes. I felt so proud of the children and I think the parents (who had watched some of the children previously running around and not following instructions), and the Head Teacher who had come on the visit, must have been curious

about how comfortable the children felt in silence. Surprisingly, I had expected the children to be more appreciative of their surroundings because there was more nature to see on the farm, but it has made me wonder if it is not in the amount of nature but the quality of engagement with even a small leaf or the flight of a seagull or pigeon that makes the difference.

Once, we returned after the weekend to find many of the apple tree branches had been broken off and many of the apples were on the floor. We contemplated this for some time and decided to become guardians of the tree. One playtime I saw the children circling the apple tree and telling others to be careful with the tree. One child chose to hold her hands in a prayer position as she walked around it.

I decided to cut some green apple shape circles and we went outside and imagined what the tree would feel like if it had feelings. We wrote messages for the rest of the school as if we were the tree; "Please look after my branches. Please don't eat my apples until they are ready. Don't swing on my branches." Many other imaginative messages were written. I laminated them and hung them up on the branches for all the school to read.

As you may have guessed I wrote this in the summer term. What about the new class and the coming colder days of autumn and winter? I will definitely continue with the quiet walk but will introduce it one morning a week at first. I also like the idea of the children starting a playground nature blog for our school website. This is a time for all of us to listen and learn from a more spacious time, just a few minutes in the school day.