

A Brief Introduction to ‘Authentic Learning’

You may have heard the term ‘authentic learning’ being used more frequently in recent years within the childcare sector, especially with the introduction of the new curriculum. But what does authentic learning mean? How does it apply to children within the early years and how can we ensure that learning is purposeful? This factsheet aims to provide you with an introduction to ‘authentic and purposeful learning,’ for further resources and support, please see the end of this factsheet.

The theory behind authentic learning

At the heart of authentic learning, lies the theory of play. Piaget believed that the learner must be active to be engaged in real learning (Piaget, 1954, 1974). Learning becomes active when children are able to connect new knowledge with their prior understanding, this can be supported by bringing the real world into learning experiences.

In order to make learning relevant to real-life experiences, learning environments must be authentic. Authentic learning is a pedagogical approach that allows children to explore, discuss, and problem solve in experiences that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant to them. For example; you may have a child in your setting that has been gardening at the weekend with their grandparents, you observe the children discussing it whilst looking through a book from the shelf. The following day you provide the children with authentic gardening resources- trowels, soil, pots, seeds/flowers and other garden equipment and observe the original child showing the other children how to plant a flower/seed in a pot.

“authentic – known to be true or real, true and accurate. “

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2022)

Why promote authentic learning?

If learning is authentic, then children become engaged in genuine learning problems that foster the opportunity for them to make direct connections between their learning, their prior knowledge and the real world. This can support children to develop their understanding and ability to apply their learning outside of the setting. Children may also find it easier to recall prior learning if they are able to link it to something within the real world.

Authentic resources within the setting can spark interest in children and engage the senses. Unlike plastic toys, which typically have a set purpose and limited learning outcome, authentic resources can often have multiple purposes and provide children with the opportunity to experience a range of textures, sizes, shapes and weights. Supporting children to experienced play with breakable, real-life items made of glass and ceramic materials can be especially valuable because it gives children the opportunity to learn how to handle items with care and develop and trust their own capabilities.

“We know that children learn well when actively engaged in experiences that stimulate their interest, ignite imagination and inspire curiosity. These experiences should encourage children to investigate, explore, create and be active participants in their learning. Relevant and meaningful experiences that are rooted in real-life contexts will enable children to make connections, apply knowledge and consolidate skills. Real-life experiences can enable children to take the lead in asking questions, identifying problems, taking risks and finding solutions. Creating opportunities for children to apply what they are learning to real-life situations helps them understand the purpose of their learning and can enhance well-being, self-esteem and resilience. It encourages exploration and creativity, and will support children to develop an understanding of the world around them. “

A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government, 2022)

10 characteristics of authentic learning

1. Real life relevance – Activities and tasks that represent those of a professional as closely as possible. E.g. real bandages, plasters, thermometer and stethoscope for hospital/doctors role play.
2. An ill-defined problem – Challenges that are not easily solvable, or don't have an obvious answer. There may be layers of tasks that need to be completed in order to solve the problem. E.g. the water source is not directly next to the mud kitchen and most of the vessels have holes in them.
3. Sustained investigation – Projects and tasks that require a significant investment of time and cannot be solved in a matter of minutes or hours.
4. Multiple sources and perspectives – Resources may be theoretical or practical, and may require children to distinguish useful information from irrelevant information. E.g. include resources that may not be relevant to the play at that time to challenge children to select the correct ones.
5. Collaboration – Individuals cannot achieve success alone. Projects and tasks will require social connections.
6. Reflection – Children will reflect on their own learning and make choices and set targets accordingly. E.g. children may discuss what have done today and what they plan to do tomorrow
7. An interdisciplinary perspective – Projects are not limited to a single subject or set of knowledge but will make use of knowledge and skills from across subjects.
8. Integrated assessment – Formative assessment is woven seamlessly into tasks and activities and used purposefully by children and practitioners alike. E.g. learning environments are continually reviewed to ensure that children are continuing to be engaged in learning opportunities.

9. Polished products – Activities and tasks will lead to the creation of a product.
10. Multiple interpretations and outcomes – There are many possible solutions and answers to the problem.

Authentic and purposeful learning, Foundation Phase professional learning resources (Welsh Government, 2021)

Supporting authentic learning in your setting

Are you feeling enthusiastic about incorporating more authenticity into the learning of children in your setting, but are not sure where to start? How do you make learning meaningful and authentic? You feel a little unsure and overwhelmed, but the process is something that you will already do within your setting. Here are a few simple steps to get you started;

- Really get to know your children; their family life, background, heritage, beliefs. Speak to families and carers, observe the children during play, ask *them* these questions. You can then begin to introduce resources or experiences into the environment that make a connection with your children
- Explore the community; What type of community is it? (farming, urban, woodland, beach) What is the community known for or proud of? Is the community facing any challenges or changes? (new roads, closing down shops/schools). Try to imagine the community through the children's eyes, what do they experience? What is important to them? Bring these aspects into the setting and take the children out into the community
- Reflect on the ethos and values of the setting; Take time to think about what is important and what you want for the children within your care. Question your current practices and the impact they have on learning, is the impact positive? Is learning meaningful for the children? Can they apply their learning in different contexts? How can we make learning more meaningful? In what ways do we already support authentic learning? How can we further develop authenticity in our setting?

Risk Assessment

When introducing 'real life' resources into your setting, that are not designed specifically for children, ensure you carefully consider your children beforehand and complete a specific risk assessment. Consider such things as; are the children sufficiently aware of the need to be careful with glass/ceramic? If no, you may wish to carefully consider the material and weight of the resources, remove some items when these children are present or ensure an adult is available to observe their use. Remember, accidents do happen and can prove to be a beneficial learning experience. You may wish to complete a risk-benefit assessment- an easy-to-use method to support settings to balance the benefits of an activity with any inherent risk, taking into account the risks while recognising the benefits to children of challenging play experiences.

Accessibility and quantity of resources are extremely important to ensure engagement, children should be able to easily reach resources and there should be sufficient quantities to avoid conflict. Resources need to be regularly checked by staff for damage and the items should be in good condition. Any splintered, cracked, damaged or dangerous items should be removed immediately. These steps should be included within your risk assessment.

Further information on Curriculum for Wales

- Open-Ended Play Ideas - NDNA Publication <https://bit.ly/3NeuHwR>
- Authentic and purposeful learning - Foundation Phase professional learning resource module on Hwb <https://bit.ly/3Na500v>

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