

# THE NATURE TABLE AS A MEANS OF PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Anne Curror

The nature table in early primary classrooms is a potentially useful aid for developing environmental awareness. To be optimally effective the nature table must be well planned and include active pupil participation.

## INTRODUCTION

"Children's curiosity about why things happen arises as much from their feelings about themselves as from their urge to know the world. There is a strong link between the personal concerns that stimulate inquiry and the resulting learning that furthers affective and cognitive growth ... When the urging of curiosity is rewarded with satisfying knowledge, the process results in feelings of competence and a desire to learn more."

(Harlan, (undated), p.3).

It is axiomatic that the teacher's responsibility is to provide opportunities and encouragement which will help to develop that 'satisfying knowledge' whilst fostering an interest in and an awareness of the environment. Having a nature table in a classroom can be a useful aid to achieving this.

## WHAT IS A NATURE TABLE?

Essentially a nature table is an area used for displaying natural objects which can be examined by the children. Ideally nature tables should be a common feature of both pre-primary and primary school classrooms. The displays should vary according to the interests of the children and the aims which the teacher has in mind. Apart from promoting environmental awareness the nature table should also provide a stimulus for subject teaching and add to the general educational development of the children.

Learning experiences at many pre-primary and primary schools are stimulated by a thematic approach to teaching e.g. 'colours', 'transport' or 'pets'. The nature table can serve as an extension to the topic under review by means of a careful selection of items which may stimulate discussion or exploration of the natural environment.

Displays need not be elaborate - in fact the simpler the better - but to be useful and stimulating they ought to be kept neat and attractive looking. If the children are encouraged to bring items of interest for the nature table it will soon contain a varied display which they can relate to. All displays of natural objects could be enhanced by an interesting background display of pictures relating to it (see Box 1).

## THE VALUE OF A NATURE TABLE

The value of any collection lies not only in its variety but in the meaning it has for children and "... a collection which children continue inspecting and handling is alive in possibilities" (Cohen & Rudolph, 1977, p.188). This is reinforced by May who describes the value of a nature table as follows:

1. The Table enables children to *touch*, *look* at closely, *smell* and *listen* to some of the things in our natural environment.
2. It encourages an interest in, and respect for, the natural world around us.
3. It helps broaden the child's understanding of the order and pattern of our universe and enables him/her to feel part of it.
4. It enriches the child's experience of simple *science*; that is, of the weather, seasons, plants growing, measurement, amount, etc.

## BOX 1

### SOME IDEAS ON WHAT TO DISPLAY ON A NATURE TABLE

- Only *natural objects* are displayed on a nature table.
- To derive maximum benefit each display should have a particular *focus* i.e. the objects have something in common which links them together, for example:

FOCUS	CONTENT
• Autumn	leaves, pods, seeds, dry grass, flowers, insects, fruit etc.
• Animal homes	wasp nest, bird nest, section of a termite mound, honeycomb etc.
• Circular shapes in nature	round stones, sunflower, oranges - whole and sliced in half, logs (to show rings), seeds, melons etc.
• Sand and soil	a collection of sand and soil of different colours and textures, a hard and soft stone to rub together to make sand, termite mound, etc.

Most objects can be collected from the local environment, when on walks or an excursion to a new area. Carefully store unused items for future use.

5. It stimulates and satisfies the child's natural curiosity."

(May, 1987, p.75).

## THE EFFECTIVE USE OF A NATURE TABLE

To be useful and effective the displays need to be referred to directly at some stage during a particular theme and may be extended into other activities during the day e.g. art activities, stories, songs or games. A display which is changed regularly will attract and maintain interest. Find out more about the objects on the table so that answers to the children's questions and explanations given will be clear and accurate (May, 1987). Refer to Box 2.

## PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS

Read & Patterson (1976) point out that the school environment provides a number of natural phenomena that attract the interests of young children e.g. insects, birds, spiders and plants as well as non-living objects such as sand, gravel, rocks and concrete. A walk through the local environment of the school may include the *controlled* collection of further items for discussion and display on the nature table.

Even very young children (3-4 year-olds) can be introduced to environmental ethics and the beginning of a sense of values by collecting only *one* example of each type of leaf or flower; by bringing back only an *abandoned* nest and never removing eggs from a nest; by *looking* at ants or beetles rather than crushing them underfoot indiscriminately. Children learn a lot by example and are usually very receptive to aspects of the environment which are made interesting to them. By doing this it is possible to encourage a *feeling for the environment* as well as being knowledgeable about it.

BOX 2

SETTING UP A NATURE TABLE DISPLAY

- Decide on the focus/theme.
- Collect natural objects relating to that theme.
- Choose pictures which extend the theme.
- Begin with only a few objects on the table - this helps to stimulate interest.
- Add new objects and remove others if necessary during the week.
- Do not crowd the table.
- Label items clearly for those children beginning to read or identify letters.
- Provide a magnifying glass if possible.
- Plan extension activities relating to the display e.g. discussion, a walk/excursion, stories, activities concerned with specific subjects.

This is illustrated by an example in the experience of the author of a pre-primary class (4-6 year-olds) who had been exploring a theme on 'homes and buildings' in a variety of ways (Curror, 1984). While on a walk to visit a nearby building site the children came across a number of obvious homes in nature i.e. a neatly woven weaver's nest, a very untidy sparrow nest, several spider webs and innumerable mounds of sand particles surrounding ant nests. *The natural curiosity of the children had already been aroused by the display of animals homes on the nature table* and most were eager to learn more about the homes they had found - stimulating more discoveries and discussions on the walk to and from the building site.

CONCLUSION

A well planned nature table has the potential for becoming a useful teaching aid not only for specific

subjects but also for the promotion of environmental awareness, including ethics and affective behaviour. The 'hands on' experience offered by such displays a valuable one which enables young children to get to know different aspects of their environment better. Using the nature table as an integral part of one's approach to teaching helps to make it more relevant to the children.

REFERENCES

COHEN D.H. & RUDOLPH M. 1977: *Kindergarten and early schooling*. Prentice Hall Inc. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

CURROR A.C.M. 1984: A record of the development of an environmental education theme at a pre-primary school. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*. No. 1 November.

FLEMMING B.M. & HAMILTON D.S. 1977: *Resources for creative teaching in early childhood education*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc. New York.

HARLAN J. (no date): *Science experiences for the early childhood years*. 2nd ed. Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co. Columbus, Ohio.

MAY H. 1987: *It works: A handbook for teachers and parents to use with young children*. International Educational Publications (Pty) Ltd. Southern Africa.

READ K. & PATTERSON J. 1980: *The nursery school kindergarten: Human relationships and learning*. 7th ed. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. New York.



FIGURE 1 An example of a nature table with an autumn theme.