

Are you watching?

By observing children as they engage with the natural world, we can learn a great deal about their learning preferences, says **Juno Hollyhock...**

I recently attended one of those meetings that you go to because you feel you should rather than because you think they will actually do anything useful. I was halfway through this particular meeting when we were informed that we would now have the latest piece of academic research into learning outdoors presented to us by a PhD student.

Out rolled the inevitable PowerPoint and reams of long words and concepts and complex references to eminent folk from the archives who had done similar research before. My inner warthog grumbled and shifted, turned its nose into its armpit and prepared for one of those 'eyes wide open' mid-meeting naps. It was that or play 'early years research terminology' bingo (*Try it - as a starting point, use 'attachment', 'Mazlow', 'Dillon et al', 'Vygotsky', 'non-directed' ... HOUSE!*) but the warthog had run out of energy for that and preferred the snooze option.

Pleasingly I spotted a video clip icon on one of the slides and half opened an eye for real as, like a 10-year-old on a wet lunchtime, I do love a video in school time. The video had no words; it was a visual recording of young children exploring and investigating the outdoors. One boy was being encouraged to go and explore in a field of tall wheat, wheat that was higher than him. He was reluctant to go in and his face said it all: "You want *me* to go in *there*? Why?"

The boy then began to watch a butterfly as it nosed its way around the corn, looking for stray wildflowers - no words still; his focus narrowed in very quickly and he was riveted by the butterfly's delicate wings and its little wavy antennae.

The butterfly fluttered off into the wheat and the boy, with one brief look back at whoever was holding the camera, followed it unhesitatingly into the field. He was soon gone from immediate view (at this point the camera was at knee height, so undoubtedly the adult still had a good view of the child; I am not promoting deliberately losing small children in fields of wheat...).

When the camera was lifted up, we could see the boy in the wheat too. The butterfly now lost to view, he was discovering all sorts of creatures and objects in and around the crop. Occasionally, like one of those bouncy dogs who appear in doorway windows when the bells rings, he would jump up and wave delightedly, grinning from ear to ear. At one point he came running back with a fallen wheat ear in his hand and then dived back in again with glee.

The point of the video was for us to understand that observation in the early years is critical. By watching this child's interaction with nature we are able to learn a lot about him and how he learns. We can also draw out learning points for him - a better understanding of nature, self-directed learning (bingo!), play and pleasure, multi-sensory experiences, the list goes on.

We don't even need to ask him about his experiences; we can draw our own conclusions from his behaviour and actions. Some children would have gone straight into the wheat field when asked, but he had to be led by something that interested him - this surely is the mapping of a framework for personalised learning that can carry on into primary and secondary education. This is how at GCSE we take this particular child and engage him in his learning: allow him to be led by something that we know fascinates him.

Filming children learning is not a new concept - the important part is the review of that film and the extraction of the clues from this type of observation that can help us to shape and guide our learning tools. The indications and the insights that we can get from this at the early years stage is incredibly powerful.

And unless you have a handy wheat field and an obliging butterfly in your classroom, this kind of experience is hard to replicate indoors...



about the author

Juno Hollyhock is executive director of Learning Through Landscapes, a UK charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. For more information on a range of services and resources for early years settings, visit ltl.org.uk