

ARCHAEOLOGY AND EARLY YEARS: SAND TRAY EXCAVATIONS

A practical introduction to archaeology in the Foundation Stage and KS1 classroom

Summary

This page provides teachers at KS1 and Foundation Stage with practical advice on how to use sand tray excavations and basic archaeological concepts to illustrate topics in the QCA schemes of work. Some suggestions are also made for developing these activities for use at KS2.

National Curriculum Links

Sand tray excavations will provide teachers with opportunities for work related to several National Curriculum Programme of Attainment targets at KS1. These include:

English	En 1 En 2 En 3	Speaking Listening Group discussion and interaction
Maths	Ma 2.1 e,f Ma 2.2a	Communicating Maths Counting
Science	Sc 1 Sc 3.1	Scientific enquiry Grouping materials
History	H1 H4	Chronological Understanding Historical Enquiry

Introduction

If you ask a young person what an archaeologist does, the answer you invariably get is *Dig*. Involving KS2 and older children in an archaeological excavation can provide an opportunity to have a real hands-on experience of the past. This is not so practicable with children at Foundation Stage or KS1 but a simulated excavation in the classroom will still provide plenty of opportunities to discuss the basic concepts of archaeology. Sand tray excavations can also be used for work on other aspects of the National Curriculum such as *materials or textures*.

Preparation

Select a range of items and bury them in the sand tray. These should not be small as they might get lost. They should not be fragile as they will have to stand up to some rough treatment. They could reflect any topic which you might be working on in the classroom. Some examples might be:

- Texture: A variety of smooth or rough objects can be used. However it is advisable to avoid fluffy/woolly textures as it will be difficult to get the sand out of them later.
- Materials/colour: Objects of different material/colour can be buried as a basis for a sorting game.
- History/story topic: In this case you would need to think about items that might fit in with the nature of the topic under study. If you were looking at Tutankhamen, you might want to use a replica object which you had bought from a museum. If the children are learning about Noah's Ark you might choose to bury some costume jewellery which could be interpreted as 'Mrs Noah's necklace'.

Introducing the topic

If you've not already done so, use one of the activities outlined in our accompanying download *'Introduction Archaeology at Foundation Stage and KS1'* to start the topic. Otherwise remind your class of work you they have already done. Emphasize how things getting lost can provide evidence for the past.

Digging in the sand tray

A group of children can now be assigned to look for the finds in the sand tray. Instinctively they will want to dig away furiously. Try to make them go more slowly. Encourage them to think about what the objects are as they reveal them with questions such as they are uncovered.

If an element of role play is desired at this stage the diggers could be provided with helmets and yellow jackets from a workman's dressing up set.

Variant

The procedure as outlined above envisages using the classroom sand tray and small groups taking turns at the activity. If you need to have more than one group working at once, simulated excavations can be built in deep plastic storage trays or boxes. This does however require more resources as each tray/box will need its own share of items to find. However, it does allow for the possibility of different results from each simulation which each group can present to the class as a whole.

In such circumstances sand is not the only material which can be used to cover the finds. Sterile cat litter is another possibility.

Looking at the finds

Archaeology is not just about finding things. A lot of our time is spent in analysing the things we find. There are two possible follow-ups to the simulated excavation. Which you choose will depend on the topic on which you are basing your work around. Again it is possible to build in an element of role play for this activity. Much of our finds analysis is carried out in the laboratory, where people wear white lab coats. This could be simulated by using the white overalls for a doctor's dressing up kit.

Follow-up 1: Looking at materials, textures and colour

Archaeologists tend to classify finds by material and then by function. Once the finds have been made in the sand tray they can be sorted into different containers according to material, texture or colour. This will reinforce other sorting exercises which you have carried out earlier.

Variant;

Taking the follow-up in the manner suggested above implies that the 'dig' has been prepared with assortments of items in fairly even numbers. If desired it would be possible to bury only one item which was different from the others. This could then be used to facilitate an exercise on *finding the odd one out*.

Follow-up 2: Developing a narrative

If you are basing this session on a historical or story topic the children's finds may be less easy to classify. In this case more attention needs to be given to developing the story. Discuss each object in turn. Look at such issues as;

- What sort of an object is this?
- What is it made of?
- What was it used for?
- Who do you think used it?
- How do you think they lost it?
- Where does it fit in the story?

Differentiation: Working with older children

A similar approach can be used with children at KS2. However, in this case the excavation tasks can be made more complicated by using a separate sand tray for

groups of three or four children. Each tray should be gridded out into squares with string.

This will allow you to:

- Build in an element of teamwork by assigning each member of the group a role (e.g. excavator, person who measures the location of the finds, recorder).
- Introduce questions of strategy. Imagine we have only enough money to excavate three of the six squares. *Where should we start? Which should we do next?*
- Focus on measurements and coordinates. *In which square was the find made? How deep was it?*

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