
Book Review

Learning What Matters to Children: an alphabet of what learners do

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with additional material from the *What Matters to Children* team, 2008

Clopton, Suffolk: Rich Learning Opportunities

[http:// www.richlearningopportunities.co.uk](http://www.richlearningopportunities.co.uk)

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This spiral bound 'alphabet of what learners do' is an extraordinarily attractive book which invites the reader's active involvement in issues that are of crucial importance to learners and educators. Its manageable format perhaps belies the seriousness of its content, because this is a book that excites the intellect, the imagination, and the desire to act. *Learning: what matters to children* builds on the work of the first book written by this team, *First Hand Experience: what matters to children* (2005) which is designed to help educators think more deeply about children's active learning and the ways in which they might create the opportunities for 'high quality first hand experiences'. *Learning: what matters to children* builds on and extends that thinking by inviting the reader to look closely at the characteristics of children who are actively engaged in learning and as a part of that close examination to consider and reconsider the choices that they can make to ensure 'worthwhile learning' for the children with whom they work. The authors declare their commitment to the principle of educators who think for themselves and have conceived and presented the book, it would seem to me, in the same way that one might plan an inviting setting for learners from birth to 11. As a reader, I feel free to navigate my way around its pages, to pick and choose what I read and how I will work with that and so the experience is stimulating in many different ways.

The organisation of the book combines careful patterning with serendipity. The use of the alphabetic principle avoids a text which swells to a rhetorical conclusion but rather offers many facets of the things which the authors openly declare to be important. Each chapter heading, shaped in part by the alphabet, makes an assertion about what learners do: learn all the time, hope, know more than adults think they do, make stories, take time. The authors present a clearly defined and principled viewpoint which firmly sets aside the view of a curriculum defined by subject areas and replaces that way of thinking with four domains of children's learning, 'what matters to children'.

These are expressed in the open ended non-finite form: being, acting, exploring, thinking. The necessity of first hand experience as the basis for worthwhile learning is embodied in text which is redolent of a pleasure in the world that children share with us –its beauty, its physicality, its challenge. The text enacts ways of thinking. Verbs – actions – are emphasised; the metaphors of food and exercise act as a vehicle for considering a child's diet and the opportunities to exercise their growing powers and 'big ideas' challenge readers to set all this in theoretical contexts. The book begins with an adapted fairy story that reminds us that learners continue to learn whether the experiences they are offered are rich and challenging or meaningless and undemanding and ends with a review of the whole. Each chapter is a patchwork of stories, questions, quotations, introductions to reading, provocations and lists, defined by frames and shading. The resulting juxtapositions and white space on the page invites readers to make their own connections as they navigate an individual path through the page and between pages. It is possible to dwell on a single section or to surf the pages in search of the repeated elements in each chapter.

Twenty-one of the twenty-six chapters focus on what learners do and include 'learning stories'; accounts of children's activities which not only demonstrate how looking at what learners do is a good way for educators to learn more about learning but invite discussion and reflection. The stories often challenge common assumptions and insist on the value of observing, and noting, what might otherwise seem unremarkable. The setting of such stories alongside other stories and the ideas of educators reveals the depth and complexity of small moments. One of the things I particularly like is that each chapter includes two suggestions for reading: one is always a book for children and the other a book for educators. In this way, the authors point the reader beyond the boundaries of the book, not only towards further reading, but also in terms of thinking of other titles that, particularly in the case of books for children, might be at least as good if not better than those suggested! I was particularly pleased to find writers and thinkers mentioned whom I was unfamiliar with, as well as those whom I am glad to see introduced to a new readership. Three of the chapters are devoted entirely to the work of three such thinkers: John Dewey, Nell Noddings and Lawrence Stenhouse. These chapters succinctly and enticingly introduce key ideas of these thinkers and certainly have prompted student teachers to find out more.

One of the strengths of this book is its combination of easy reading [you could start with a seventy word snippet] and uncompromising seriousness of ideas. It is a bit like a high quality Hello magazine for the staff room, because you can read a page or more quite quickly, but the snippets that you read provide you with much to think about and the desire to find out more. I find that the format provokes thought in a very pleasurable way. I find myself impelled to go to the library, to try out things, to talk to others and to dream in the way I love to do when I am plotting and planning opportunities for learning. It acknowledges that the educator reader may continue to possess that 'thirst for understanding...a veritable passion' that Susan Isaacs attributes to

young learners. In acknowledging the potential passion that all educators may possess, the book provides an inspiration and encouragement to teachers who may feel tied down by the curriculum or who may have forgotten what is possible. This is an ambitious and generous book which includes a wide sweep of ideas within its 120 pages. The authors draw on contemporary thinkers as well as those writing at the beginning of the last century and it is instructive to observe how strong is the influence of early years educators; and how one might continue to hope that their influence will extend beyond the reception classroom and into the rest of the primary years. It is also an immensely serious book which rejects the word play for its frivolous connotations and embraces the activities of children who are 'profound thinkers, grappling with challenging and complex ideas.' Consequently, it is an immensely exhilarating book. Every educator's home should have one!

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