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Harnett, P. (2010) Do we really need that washboard. *Primary History* .

We recommend you cite the published version.

The publisher's URL is <https://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/secure/21736/>

Refereed: No

(no note)

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Do we really need that wash board?

— Penelope Harnett

Something curious is happening with the learning of our youngest children. Social historians of education 50 years hence will look back with puzzlement on the number of young children who were taught about Victorian washing practices/laundry in the latter years of the twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

Why this preoccupation with learning about cleanliness? Why were so many young children being taught how people washed clothes in the past? How did such a topic as laundry become so embedded within the curriculum? The answers to such questions may be found below.

The National Curriculum for history requires young children to learn about different ways of life in the past and it could be argued that knowledge of laundering practices is a very important feature of this. However, there is also a requirement that young children should learn from a range of different sources of evidence, including artefacts, and it could be that this requirement is driving curriculum knowledge and content in schools. It is not always easy to get hold of a good range of artefacts for children to handle, but wash boards and flat irons, figures 1 and 2, are readily available and provide first-hand opportunities for children. They are relatively cheap and unbreakable too!

But even if wash boards do have these qualities, combined with readily purchased blocks of soap and scrubbing brushes – should they dominate the curriculum to the extent they do? Do they, at a deeper level, embed cultural messages and attitudes towards the role of women in society, with wash boards and flat irons having a symbolic role?



Figure 1 Wash Board

From my own experience of teaching 5 year olds, I recall that even before we could begin to look at the Victorians, we needed to discuss contemporary laundering practices and ensure that children knew something about how their own clothes were washed and dried. For some children this may be interesting and traditional 'home corners' in infant classrooms are usually equipped with cookers and ironing boards.

Play is fundamental to young children's learning and I have seen some imaginative lessons based on the wash board and flat iron and children playing in well equipped Victorian laundries. However, given the wealth of opportunities which the past offers, it could appear that we are rather limiting children's experiences of history. Is laundry really that interesting?

Kieran Egan (2008) reminds us of the appeal of fantasy and strong characters for young children. In history this includes the use of exciting stories to captivate young audiences and to introduce them to powerful emotions – can this be achieved with the wash board? As teachers we have to ask ourselves: are we concerned with making mini historians of the future or are we interested in creating young people with a love of learning and fascination with the past?

So the question is – do we really need wash boards and flat irons? The availability of such artefacts would appear to be influencing the curriculum. We need to be critical of the range of artefacts which we use and also remember that not all artefacts need be authentic: we may use replicas. Nor can we handle every artefact: a visit to local museums offers the great variety of objects in their collections. Articles in this edition of *Primary History* suggest different opportunities for learning through artefacts which we need to take into account as we prepare and plan a curriculum which will excite and arouse curiosity. Yet we need also to recognise that artefacts might not be available or the most appropriate for all topics and to plan activities with children's interest in mind. Do we really need that wash board? Maybe yes – but only if we also include a greater variety of other exciting learning opportunities in history as well.

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References

Egan, K. (2008) 'Teaching history to young children' *Primary History, Issue 50*: 11-13. London: Historical Association.

Figure 2 Flat Iron

