

Walkergate Early Years Centre

Death, Fear and Bravado



An Interest in Dancing

The project begins when an interest in dancing is observed amongst the group. The educators make every effort to support this, creating a special 'dancing room' indoors, providing music and natural materials as a stimulus for movement. The children skip about the room but it seems as if their dance is more a performance for the educators and each other than an expressive language of movement.

The educators know that the children love to dance and discuss whether their intervention is inappropriate. They are concerned to develop the children's natural expressive movement and decide to offer the group the stimulus of a beach encounter.



'We went to the beach and it was just a wonderful day.'

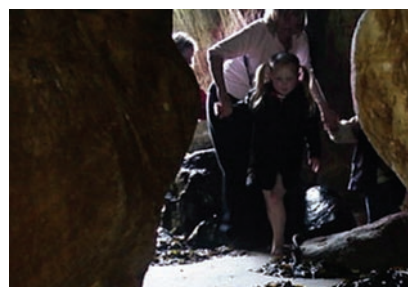
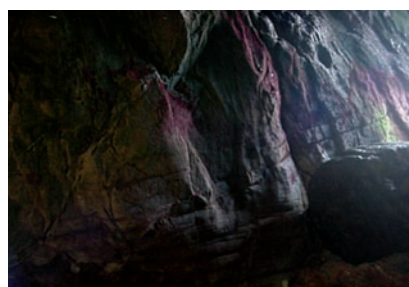


The Caves



Arriving at the caves the children stop. Michael: 'I'm going to go in.'
Amy: 'Oh, it's dark in there.'
Darius: 'It's very dark, there's a bear in there.'
Shannon: 'Lets go and see.'
Amy: 'Look it's a monster and it's dripping'
Adam: 'I'm going to go back and have a look.'
Shannon: 'I've been right down to the bottom and I was scared, me.'
Darius: 'There's a scary black cat sitting on the doormat, it's dripping.'

Does the idea of the bear enable the children to share their fearful feelings?



The children tease and prod this element of fear that is common to much of their play.

Educator: 'Inside, the caves are magical because suddenly it's dark, looking out at light, and colours change, creating a textural and very beautiful place. It is very affecting and wonderful to be slow and unhurried.'

The Finds



Entering the cave the children are apprehensive:

Darius: 'I'm going in there with you its scary.'

There is high excitement upon discovering a dead fish and a bird's foot.

Darius: 'Look, come here Adam and Amy.'

Look, a foot, a foot! Look at this foot.'

Amy: 'Did you touch it'? (She studies the foot carefully.)

Adam: 'I touched it.'

Amy: 'It's there! What are the pink bits?'

Darius: 'A foot, it's there.'

Darius touches it, 'There's blood there on its side. Touch it. Go on, I've been in the cave, there's a box in the cave. Nicola, come and look. There's a blue box in the cave. It's treasure. I want to climb those rocks.'

Amy: 'There's a rock and it looks like a house.'



The children carefully transport their box of finds back to nursery.

Its contents are examined and a conversation had over lunch.



Shannon: 'I went down in the cave and saw something dripping, and there was some food there and there was a bear. I heard dripping and it was a bear.'

Amy: 'No there wasn't.'

Adam: 'Yes there was.'

Shannon: 'Was the bear there?'

Adam: 'Was it scared?'

Shannon: 'I went in by myself.'

Darius: 'Cos there was some wood there with some names on. Did the bear do it?'

Michael: 'Mum did your name!'

Educator: 'How did the fish die?'

Michael: 'A shark ate it.'

Amy: 'Or another fish.'

Darius: 'Or a fish or a whale.'

Amy: 'Will the fish get alive?'

Where's its eyes... are they opening?'

Educator 'No, it's dead.'

Amy: 'When are they opening?'

Michael: 'This is off the monster!'

'Come on hold it! It's not real!'

Darius: 'I saw a black thing coming out' (He is looking closely, he notices some light coloured scales). 'Ah, I can see its teeth.' The children all want to touch the eye of the fish.

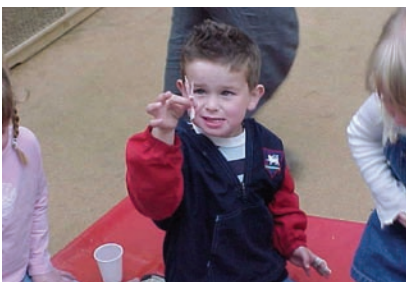
Michael: 'How can the fish get back to the seaside?'

Educator: 'Do you want it to get back to the seaside?'

Michael: 'No because it might get killed by the shark!'

Adam: 'It will have big teeth.'

The challenge is to provide a context in which good questions are asked, in which curiosity is aroused.



Fishes, Eyes and Dead Seaweed



Images of the children's visit are displayed allowing them to revisit and reflect on their experiences. Some artefacts are examined using a light box.



The children submerge the dried weed in water and watch it come back to life

Adam: (looking at the dried up seaweed) 'It's died like the fish.'

Adam: 'If we put the fish back in the water would that come alive?'



Adam's question makes the educators wonder too. Is this a subject to research with the children at another time?

The Dance

The children are tired after the trip and everyone is surprised when they ask to dance.

Darius: 'Can we dance?'

The objects from the beach remain the centre of attention



They move naturally to the music, without inhibition, seeming to conjure their dance. This requires a special kind of secure, respectful environment.

Have their experiences on the beach radically altered their movement repertoire?

The skipping has disappeared and is replaced by an astonishing 'performance.'



Michael: 'Shannon, look at my shark teeth!'



Shannon: 'I'm a dead fish!'



Darius: 'I'm a whale'
Amy: 'I'm a fish!'



Was she recollecting the sensual and textual experience of the tractor tyre pattern on the beach?

Educator: 'You could see, there really was a connection between the movement and the experiences at the beach...'

Educator: 'It was dramatic, this sudden change, and they just moved in a completely different way after the experience... They were really talking. They kept looking back at the trough and touching the things in the trough. All their senses brought them to that state.'

The educator team analyse the children's movement and hypothesise about the source of their innovative postures. They feel it is important to sustain and develop the expressive movement of the children that has now become key to the project. If the source was children's first hand experiences on the beach, could a return visit provoke further development of this movement language? What if the children had the opportunity to see some of the sea creatures up close and moving?



Amy gently moves her hand and head across the floor.

The Lab



They decide to take the children back to the beach to the Dove Marine Laboratory with a professional dancer who could support movement ideas in later sessions. The laboratory is right on the beach. Inside, the children can handle and feel the sea creatures in the tanks. It seems to have a powerful effect on the group.

Emerging from the lab onto the sand the children begin to dance.



*What is the play about?
Are the children inspired by the sea creatures they have been handling or just enjoying the enclosure and containment the Lycra affords them?*



Lycra was introduced initially to create a new focus. The children took turns going underneath and making shapes.

Dance artist: 'My approach was to try to keep a balance between guiding the children's movement and following their ideas.'

Educator: 'the children just started moving and it became a kind of stage... it was just a fantastic moment.'

Educator: 'We should be very careful and stand back and wait and wait... we are too influenced by what we already know and have been taught or influenced to think what we should do.'

Their dance reveals a powerful connection between their ideas of the creatures and their physicality. Using the red cloth as a train, the children return to the caves full of stories from their previous visit. Again there are monsters and elements of apprehension, boldness and curiosity.

What strategy can be used to draw the group back together to refocus on their earlier ideas with movement and more recent experiences in the lab?

Back at Nursery... Transforming Ideas

The following week the dancer works with the children drawing directly from their experiences at the beach.



Educator: 'The children seemed to have their own 'signature' movements... building up a language that was recognisable.'

The educators discuss the children's movement and the impact of the caves. Is their enveloping and enclosure an extension of their cave experiences?



A triangular prism becomes part of the play, as children are encouraged to be different creatures in a rock pool. Much of the play involves covering and enveloping.



As the children's vivid beach experiences recede and diminish, it seems as if their movements are becoming stylised and repetitive. Perhaps it is time to focus on movement itself?

The dancer intervenes to introduce a new movement vocabulary to the children. They explore jumping, spinning, rolling, fast, slow, and statues, using props such as floaty scarves, stretchy elastic and large birth balls. Each brings its own quality of movement to the children's dance.

Different strategies are used to support the movement:

The children look at photographs of themselves dancing.



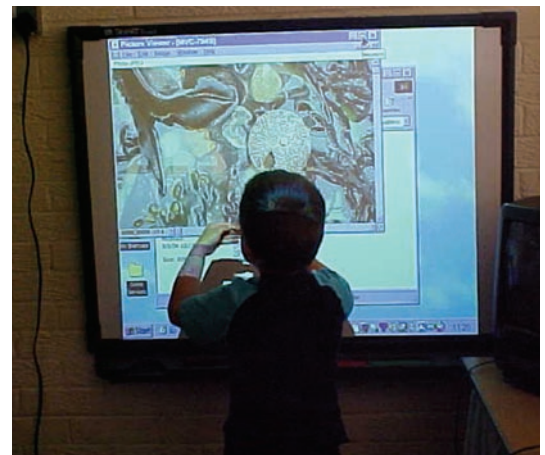
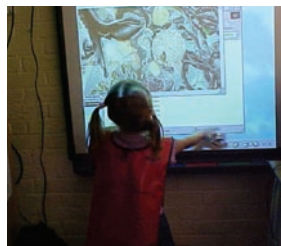
They make shadow dances using projected images from their beach experience.



They move to extracts from different pieces of music.



They use paint to capture the marks their movement makes on the ground.



They look at images of their beach finds.

Dance, Paint and Recollection

Following the dance sessions the educators offer the children the opportunity to represent their expressive movement through the medium of silk painting. All the photographs and projected images and are used to remind the children of their visit.

Educator: 'The children were dancing in front of the images and then painting... it was lovely.'

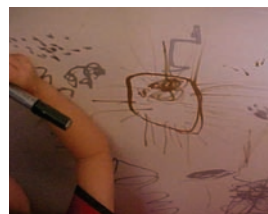
The children's painting reveals the significant individual experiences.



Darius paints the starfish looking carefully at the photo image of the starfish. 'I felt it' he said. 'Now I am going to do the brittle starfish.'



Adam: 'I'm going to paint my tyre, and I'm going to paint me next to it.'



Michael chooses dark colours and thicker brushes seeming to layer the paint. Is he recreating his experience of the cave?

The project was a researchful experience for the educators.

'I've learned to put the children first. There's so much we need to learn from them, that's the key to starting anything – looking at them.'