

The Sounds of Leaping

Exploring relationships between music and movement

The Sounds of Leaping project took place between September 2008 and January 2009 in Trimdon Grange Infant and Nursery school, County Durham. It involved the children in the reception and nursery classes and two educators: Tracey Merritt and Melanie Clark. I worked in school for eleven half-day sessions alongside Tracey and Melanie. The project continued to develop in between my visits, and we kept in touch with each other regularly about what had been going on.

the project was part of a wider Sightlines research focus called The Drama of Sound, which explored children's use of music and movement as expressive languages. The title, *The Sounds of Leaping*, came out of the children's particular interest.

As educators, we wanted to develop our own competencies, especially in enabling children to express their ideas using music. We know that children are eager and ready to express themselves in many ways but that the language of musical expression can often be overlooked. As a team, we share in the belief that children are sociable and capable and full of curiosity and imagination. We want the school to be a place where the children can explore, develop and share their ideas to the full.

We started by considering our main research questions and how we would begin to work with the children. We envisaged working not with all the children in the early years unit but with an emerging group centred on a particular developing interest.

We had several research questions. How do children relate music and movement? What music can come from thinking, stories and movement? How could children create their own music using their movement ideas as a starting point?

We wanted to work with the children's own ideas and so decided to begin by observing their free play. We were looking

out for any interests or fascinations that could lead to an exploration of the link between music and movement. Around this time, a group of friends, mainly boys in reception, had become interested in building rockets outside using large wooden blocks. We began to observe the children's play more closely. Could this make a good beginning for our project?



There seemed to be two key elements to the children's play: a story theme that was developing around the idea of rockets blasting into space and the action of jumping from the blocks.

Where could the project go from here? We had various ideas. We could follow a story-based approach, encouraging the children to explore the movements and sounds of the rockets. They might want to create stories about adventures in space and use movement and music to express their ideas. Or we could follow a movement-based approach. Perhaps we could explore with the children their fascination with leaping from the blocks. What was it about leaping they really loved? Were there other movements that the children were interested in? Could they create sounds to go with their movements, or would this be too abstract?

Through discussion we decided to follow a movement-based approach because the movement element seemed to be at the centre of the children's interest. We thought that if we encouraged them to develop stories the movement and music enquiry might get lost.





Harry: 'I did a super high jump! It was one big jump. My hand is even taller than the school building.'



Jack: 'I love jumping very high, higher than a tree.'



Sam: 'We jumped off some really high blocks! Look at me: I'm flying like a bird.'



There were now about twelve boys in the reception class who were playing at leaping off the blocks together. Lots of other children in both reception and nursery watched and sometimes joined in.

We decided to enable these jumping children to have more time to jump together. We felt that it was important for them to explore their movement ideas fully before introducing music. Our role was to observe, document and actively support what we felt was significant in their play. We hoped that this would encourage them to explore their interest more deeply and that we would be able to find out why jumping was so exciting for them.

We shared our photographs and video with the jumping children and invited them to draw pictures of themselves jumping and to discuss their thoughts and ideas.

We met together to reflect on what we had learnt from the children's work so far.

Here are some of our thoughts:

- the children's play was powerful, exciting and daring. Many of them were interested in jumping really high;
- there was considerable engagement and excitement amongst all the children involved. Being with friends seemed to be important: many of the children talked about who they had been jumping with;
- there was a recurring theme of interaction with the natural world as the children jumped, as if the physical sensation brought them closer to the birds, the wind and the clouds. They relished the sensation of leaving the ground and launching themselves into a different and more thrilling element – the air;
- looking at the photographs inspired emotional and imaginative responses: they were very excited to see themselves in flight, looking strong and powerful.

Bringing in sounds

At the end of an afternoon of jumping, we decided to gather the jumping children together for discussion. We wanted to introduce the concept of relating music to the children's movements so we asked them if they could think of any sounds to go with their jumps. We were concerned that they might find this too abstract, but they actually had lots of ideas. Some were sounds for launching into the air, others were sounds for landing.

Bradley: 'A thump sound would go with a jump.'

Lewis: 'I think this is the sound, when you stomp, stomp, stomp!'

Harry: 'It's like fireworks!'

Jack: 'Bang!'



Now that the children had begun to explore different sounds for jumping, we decided to introduce instruments.

We provided a variety of different instruments for them to play with. After much exploration, the whole group agreed that drums could make the sound for jumping.

The sound of the drums and the energy of the children's jumps seemed to share the same explosive, powerful quality.

The strategy of choosing an instrument for a particular kind of movement seemed to be fruitful and have potential for further exploration. We encouraged the group of 'jumping children' to think about other movements they liked and invited them to create corresponding sounds.



The cabasa was chosen to make the sound for rolling and the chime bar for hopping. Were these choices connected to the physical action of playing the instrument? (The cabasa is played with a rolling action, and the movement of the beater when playing a chime bar is similar to hopping.)

Many of the jumping children had become increasingly interested in playing musical instruments so we gave them lots of time to do it. In particular, we wanted to encourage careful listening amongst the group.

We took time to observe how the children interacted and what kind of music they were creating together. On one occasion, a group of five children played together outside – we noticed Lewis' highly rhythmic drumming, Alfie listening carefully and copying on



the tambourine and how sometimes the whole group played a single, strong beat in synchrony.

The children involved in the project so far were all highly engaged and interested. We had begun to work with the idea of them creating music to go with their movement ideas. Where could we go from here?

One idea we had was to create an obstacle course with a group of the children where they could do all their favourite movements: jumping, hopping, rolling, and perhaps other movements too. We also thought about using Harry's idea of the sound of fireworks for jumping. As it was almost bonfire night, we could take a group of the children to see some fireworks and investigate creating music for fireworks blasting off.



Another idea we had was to create a film with a small group of the jumping children, using the video footage we had taken. Watching the silent film could inspire them to create their own musical soundtrack. Again, following much discussion, we decided to go ahead with the film idea because it seemed to have the most exciting possibilities both for us and the children. The prospect of using new technology was exciting for us, and we thought that adding music to film would be an ideal way for the children to create their own music and movement composition.

In order to work in more depth with the children's ideas, we decided to work for a few weeks with a smaller group (we had worked with about fifteen children up to this point, sometimes all together and sometimes in smaller groups). We realised that only some of the jumping children would be interested in continuing the project with a specific focus on music, so we talked to them to find out who would like to continue.

As a staff, we discussed who was interested and would benefit from working in more detail. We then chose four children who we thought had a good balance of dispositions and strengths. We showed this group the silent video of jumping, rolling and hopping, and invited them to create music to go with it. They found it much easier to play after watching the video rather than play and watch at the same time. The group also decided to include spinning in their film and chose the octachime to make the music for spinning.

The group of four children worked together over a period of about a month creating a four-minute video composition with their own musical soundtrack. We wanted to give them as much ownership over their work as possible and enabled them to make crucial editorial decisions about the order of clips and choice of music. We noticed how, when watching their film and listening to their music, the children could not stop themselves from moving!

In addition to creating the film, we thought it would be interesting for the children to explore drawing the sounds they had created. In a previous project with a different group, we had found that the children tended to draw imaginative, narrative pictures; the abstract idea we were intending didn't catch hold.

With this group, we wanted to encourage the children to draw graphic representations of their music rather than creating story ideas. We placed photographs of instruments in the middle of some large paper and asked the children to draw the sounds coming out of the instruments.

Jack is playing the chime bars while Zak is drawing the sound.

Jack started by playing single notes. When he changed to playing glissandi (sliding the beater along the chime bars), Zak changed his notation:



The children shared their composition with the rest of their class, and we invited parents to a special open evening to celebrate the project. The parents were particularly struck by the meanings behind the drawings of jumping. They also commented on how great it was to see boys engaged in music and movement, which can often be dominated by girls. We were able to give each of the children involved a DVD of their work to keep.

During the project we explored in detail how music and movement can be used as expressive languages. The children involved had not previously shown any particular interest in music, but through the connection with their own fascination with leaping they all showed high engagement and competence in musical expression. There is a joyfulness and exuberance to their movements and in the music they created.

The project demonstrated an approach which began with the children's own interests and fascinations and into which other learning possibilities were woven. The educators gained confidence to explore new areas outside of their own specialisms and make connections between areas of learning. The children became more confident through the process of being listened to, constructing the project together with the adults and having their own interests and ideas valued.

Cath Reding is a musician and educator working in nursery and primary schools in the north east of England.

A more detailed project narrative of *The Sounds of Leaping* will be available on DVD (with supporting materials) from the Sightlines bookshop in Autumn 2009.

