

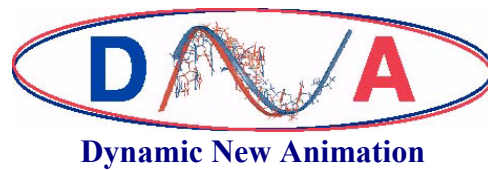
Dynamic New Animation

IMAGINARY LEAPS

pilot projects evaluation



Miriam Murtin



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**The Rayne
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Contents

Introduction	4
The Very Hungry Caterpillar	8
Creating environments	14
Masks	17
Shadow play	22
Transforming objects	26
Finger puppets	32
Balloons	35
Balls, hoops and cloth	38
Further thoughts and observations	41
Other outcomes	46
Conclusion	49
Future development	51
Appendix i: Artists' Statements	53

Appendix ii: Nursery Curriculum56

INTRODUCTION

Imaginary Leaps is a ground breaking three-year programme of work committed to developing creative learning activities *with* the people they are intended to engage: young children. An initiative by Puppetry and Visual Theatre Company, **Dynamic New Animation (DNA)**, the project introduces children and their parents to the importance of creative play and imaginative learning to child development and the acquisition and development of social skills and interaction. The company offers training in theatre and puppetry skills to selected arts practitioners, which are then introduced to early years settings in the Lancashire area. The project divides up into three phases:

1. Research and Development (2006-07)
2. Artists' training and Pilot Projects (October-December 2007).
3. Lancashire-wide projects (Spring 2009)

This document evaluates the pilot projects that were run in three Early Years settings in the Lancashire area. It asks two questions:

1. How can an artist at an Early Years setting impact on the social, emotional and cultural development of early years children?
2. How can different Early Years environments impact upon artists' ability to develop free creative theatre play in that particular setting?

The evaluation is based on first-hand observations by the artists involved, a set of written reports and a number of interviews with key workers at the nurseries. All artists provided self-reflective reports for each session and the evaluator visited two or three sessions in each Early Years setting.

About DNA

DNA have been creating puppetry and visual theatre since 1994. DNA is devoted to the promotion of puppetry as an art form to people of all ages, ethnic origins and abilities through performance, educational workshops and development work. The Imaginary Leaps project is part of a rich and varied early years strand that DNA have been developing since 1995.

As Artistic Director, **Rachel Riggs** is passionate about Free Creative Early Years Play, and with DNA is continuously researching the links between child development and the art form of puppetry. As many believe, all people are born creative and DNA believe that all are born puppeteers! A young child's imaginative play can turn everyday items into extraordinary characters to foster emotional literacy and many other areas of expression. During free play with objects and materials, a child often uses symbols (e.g.: a stick for a sword) and creates play props to work out identity issues. It is this transformational quality from everyday objects to extraordinary props which lies at the heart of DNA's work. DNA refine and develop their artistic methodologies through constant feedback with their target audiences, and Rachel ensures the work is relevant and attainable to early years service providers.

DNA's Working Practice for Early Years Creative Play workshops

When devising and developing work for young children, Dynamic New Animation (DNA) starts with the exploration of the physical properties of materials, object and puppets. This is done using a process of simple play with an engaged imagination, similar to the ways that young children explore the world.

This imaginative transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary; this ability of objects and figures to transform fluidly from representing one thing into something completely different, lies at the core of DNA's Early Years projects.

The purpose of creating work in this way is to encourage and stimulate the imaginative play of children, engaging them as audience and participants in a process of creating characters, stories and worlds out of the everyday objects around us.

The artists

Hayli Clifton

Hayli trained at Bretton Hall and with Philippe Gaulier in Paris. She has been artist in residence with dance company Cie Songes in the South of France since 2006, directing and choreographing for them, as well as teaching spatial and movement awareness to Deaf and Blind communities in the Rhône-Alps region, and to children aged from 6 months to 6 years in Valence. Her other teaching specialisms include mask work and puppetry.

Amanda Leigh Owen

Having initially trained as an actress, Amanda has worked extensively as a freelance Drama Specialist, including leader in role, forum theatre, devising, scriptwriting, directing and facilitating children and young people. Amanda's work includes using drama to aid the learning of English as a foreign language (in Italy), assisting Youth Workers, as well as facilitating training courses for adults who work with children in the "Use of Drama and Creativity with Children".

Liz Fitzgerald-Taylor

Liz trained at The Arden School of Theatre, Manchester, and is Joint Artistic Director of No Nonsense Theatre Company, which uses a combination of art forms including puppetry, mask, music and clowning. As a performer, Liz has worked with numerous theatre companies in the

UK to create new work for young audiences. As a Director, she has worked with learning disabled actors, also creating training packages for learning disabled young artists, non-disabled artists and volunteers wanting to work within the learning-disabled sector.

The evaluator

Miriam Murtin works at PALATINE, the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Dance, Drama and Music. She takes a keen interest in puppetry and Early Years work and holds an MA in Theatre Practice from Exeter University. Miriam has been involved in children's theatre in a variety of capacities, including as a writer and director.

The settings

Appletree Nursery School, Lancaster

Artist: **Hayli Clifton**

Average number of children in Creative Play sessions: 12-15.

Appletree Nursery School is a newer nursery in a pocketed area of the Marsh Estate of Lancaster. It has very good facilities and has a lot of space. A spacious outside area includes a climbing frame and a sand pit and offers plenty of opportunities for exploratory play. Free-flow play between the indoor and outdoor environment is encouraged and is part of the daily routine.

Stoneygate Children's Centre, Preston

Artist: **Amanda Leigh Owen**

Average number of children in Creative Play sessions: 20-25.

Stoneygate Children's Centre is an established nursery in the centre of Preston, which includes a Local Authority Nursery School offering teacher-led classes for 3 and 4 year olds. The nursery has a large, bright inside space, which uses low dividers to create smaller, designated areas, and has a small, paved outside area.

Wade Hall Children's Centre, Leyland

Artist: **Liz Fitzgerald-Taylor**

Average number of children in Creative Play sessions: 4.

Wade Hall Children's Centre is a small Sure Start initiative that includes a "One O'Clock Club" (a parent-toddler group), which was established by a few of the children's mothers. Wade Hall mainly works with community groups and with parents.

The Very Hungry Caterpillar

Each section is accompanied by Learning Intentions and an overview of six areas of the Nursery Curriculum.¹

Learning Intentions

To express and communicate ideas, thoughts and feelings by using imaginative and role play, movement and props related to a story.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Co-operation and taking turns in role-play.
- Have confidence and perseverance to try new experiences.

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Communicate ideas through telling stories and role play.
- Listening to others and knowing that communication is a two-way process (taking turns).

Mathematical Development

- Sequencing and ordering events in time order.
- Matching and counting pictures and objects.
- Days of the week.
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World.
- Linking personal experiences to enhance role play – knowledge of lifecycle of a butterfly.
- Engage children's curiosity about the natural world using role play and story telling.

Physical Development

- Manipulate and control story props to retell stories.

¹ I am grateful to Angela Dixon of Appletree Nursery for providing the individual learning intentions for each session. See also <http://www.appletreechildrenscentre.co.uk/nurseryourcurriculum.htm> for an outline of the learning intentions.

- Co-ordination of hand and body movements to create a character in role.

Creative development

- Use imagination to create different roles using story props and story book.
- Explore body movement, props and puppets to tell a story.

The kit

- A set of different sized caterpillar puppets including a tiny finger puppet, a small rod puppet caterpillar and a larger caterpillar with a body that was made out of an washing machine pipe/ tube.
- Oversized, painted foam fruit with holes for the caterpillar to crawl through; a hinged wooden cabinet with fixed fruit (with holes).
- An acetate butterfly on a metal rod.
- Small paper butterfly shapes (for drawing on) and straws.
- Real fresh fruit that was offered to the children to eat.
- Some of the artists brought their own materials including shimmery cloth and a picnic basket.

Each artist used their own particular style of engaging the children in this initial session. **Amanda** went and joined in with two boys who were already playing in the sandpit, using a type of imitation strategy but letting the children lead and show her a skill they already knew: how to build sand-castles and only then began engaging the children with the props from the kit.

Hayli used games to draw the children's attention, first playing with the large fruit props herself, then playing peek-a-boo with those children who were watching and making eye contact.

Liz, who was working in a much smaller space, laid out the props and the real fruit and let the children "find" and explore them.

Though the artists employed a variety of methods in encouraging with creative play throughout the eight weeks they worked with the children, this was representative of the style they used to *begin*.

Generally, the Very Hungry Caterpillar session was perceived by staff and parents as positive with the children being engaged and responding well to the stimuli.

“When Sam came home after *The [Very] Hungry Caterpillar* session he wanted to get the reading book out immediately. He played for days afterwards.”²

“The story was enhanced considerably by the use of puppets and the children really enjoyed the activities.”³

At Stoneygate, a little boy called Jaequarn who had been relatively quiet during the session, apparently was found the following day re-enacting the story, clearly having taken it all in. And for young Jacob at the playgroup in Leyland, the Very Hungry Caterpillar session included a true development.

“Jacob was very frightened of the Rod Caterpillar to start with – very jumpy and timid. However, at the beginning of the session, he put each caterpillar into a group and called it “the family”. ... Throughout the session, he kept coming back to the caterpillars and either re-grouping them, or just tentatively touching them. He eventually made friends with the big one – the mummy. And the end of the session, when all the other children had left the room, he began telling Miriam [the evaluator] the story of the Hungry Caterpillar. He read from the book.”⁴

Amanda notes how three children became fascinated with the butterflies they had made landing on her head and face and her reactions to them.

² Sam’s mother, quoted in Liz Fitzgerald-Taylor (LFT), *Very Hungry Caterpillar* report, 22 November 2007.

³ Angela Dixon, key worker at Appletree Nursery.

⁴ Liz Fitzgerald-Taylor, *Very Hungry Caterpillar* report, 1 November 2007.

In her report she writes: "They liked the fact that their actions and the butterflies were changing my facial expressions"⁵. This is one of many examples that illustrate how an engaged artist, for whom play is their metier after all, can make a real difference. Hayli and Liz were also frequently eliciting cries of joy, shrieks of laughter as well as serious, engaged creative play from the children. Individual play workers may not always have the inclination, confidence or indeed skill to get so deeply engrossed in the play that they start making silly faces or sounds. Visiting artists who are not involved in the day-to-day running of the nursery perhaps have the advantage they are really able to support and extend deep free-flow play.

I observed a clear difference in confidence of staff at different Early Years' settings with the project starting. It was interesting to note their involvement during this first session.

"It was felt that the workers had prevented [the children] from eating due to worries of safety and disruption to routine". Concern for health and safety, concern for change in routine, concern for DNA's property, worries that the children would be perceived as misbehaving and also that they weren't sure what to expect from the session or what their role was."⁶

"The first week, staff weren't sure what to expect. They thought it was some kind of entertainment."⁷

Early on during the Very Hungry Caterpillar session at Wade Hall in Leyland, one of the key workers left the room, returning with a giant toy butterfly and several other props. Was this a worry about lack of structure or perhaps a need to "entertain"?

⁵ Amanda Leigh Owen (ALO), Very Hungry Caterpillar report, 9 October 2007.

⁶ Amanda Leigh Owen, Very Hungry Caterpillar report, 9 October 2007.

⁷ From interview with Sarah Howard, play worker at Stoneygate.

At Appletree staff seemed to have been a little more at ease. Hayli noted that they plan to prolong the ideas and activity as they already have a *Very Hungry Caterpillar* story box and that she felt very supported in this way of working.⁸

Recommendations

The amount of communication that is needed between artists and key workers can never be underestimated, particularly in the early stages of setting up the work. Initial meetings with managers are not always filtered down and key workers are not always involved early on. It would be good to set up a few ground rules explaining what might happen prior to the start of the first session.

Future development needs to include a more child friendly set of props for the *Very Hungry Caterpillar*. The oversized foam fruit was very popular. It would be good to include more caterpillars. DNA are looking to gain sponsorship from educational toy suppliers Insectlore.

⁸ Hayli Clifton, *Very Hungry Caterpillar* report, 29 October 2007.

Creating environments

Learning Intentions

To create environments using a variety of materials.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Co-operation and taking turns in natural environment.
- Have confidence and perseverance to try new experiences.
- Share and co-operate when using resources.

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Communicate for different purposes – share ideas, organise others, negotiation, question.
- Develop a widening vocabulary for movement.
- Opportunities of the creation and the development of story.

Mathematical Development

- Begin to use mathematical language in play – bigger than, smaller.
- Notice shapes in the environment.
- Begin to use positional vocabulary – under, over, through, behind, in front etc.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- Explore the natural world to create environments.
- Investigate a range of materials using appropriate senses.

Physical Development

- Travel around, under, over and through objects safely and with control.
- Create ways of moving imaginatively and with confidence.

Creative development

- Use imagination and a range of materials to create environments to explore.
- Develop the imaginative use of fabric and props to develop role play.

The kit

Clotheshorses, tissue paper, large sheets, pegs, string, and tape.

This was a very successful session across the three Early Years settings. All three artists enabled the creation of the environments to be very much child-led. For unrelated reasons, the groups of children participating in this session were all relatively small.

Appletree: 8-12 children

Stoneygate: 15 children

Leyland: 2 children

At Stoneygate, some of the staff seemed to have been a bit wary at first but soon realised that the children were able to play without creating too much chaos (though Amanda did note that children had to keep being reminded that the clothes horse was not a climbing frame!⁹). Where it was being used, *music* had a positive effect on both the children and the play workers, offering a supportive aural environment.

At Appletree, the Environments session was held outside, which created plenty of opportunities for rough and tumble play. The children really made use of the space and Hayli observed how refreshing it was that staff did not seem to worry too much about children falling over occasionally.¹⁰

In Leyland, the environments session provided an opportunity to create story.

“As there was only one participant, Harry, to start with, we just played with the objects lying around in the centre. Harry then found the large roll of tissue paper and ... he rolled out a large piece. I kept to the idea of not leading for a long time, and letting

⁹ ALO, Creating Environments report, 16 October 2007.

¹⁰ HC, Creating Environments report 5 November 2007.

him lead the play. The paper became a pathway, and Harry wanted to race up and down the pathway, so we did. ... However, after a while, I suggested we put the tissue paper onto different levels – this sparked his idea to make a den. Fabrics were put over maidens, and pegs became many different objects, from fixing fabric, to fish. ... Once he began making, Noah joined (Noah is a shy little boy) but loved the idea of making a den. The two boys made an environment. However, it was Harry [who] suggested calling it “an aquarium”. ... Harry wanted to make a complete story. I took notes and facilitated his story making. However, I continually encouraged Noah to take part. Although shy, Noah ideas were far more fantastical than Harry’s. Harry tends to make stories that are based on real life. So although we were in an aquarium, the central character lived like a human being in Harry’s eyes. Whereas Noah wanted magic pathways and monsters.”¹¹

Recommendation

Stronger, safer den building kits with wooden clothes horses, soft cotton rope, wooden dolly pegs etc.

¹¹ LFT, Creating environments report, 15 November 2007.

Masks

Learning Intentions

To explore the use of masks in developing imaginative role-play.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Co-operation, sharing resources and taking turns in role-play.
- Have confidence and perseverance to try new experiences.

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Communicate using gestures, body language, speech and noises.
- Discussion with peers and adult to create a role.

Mathematical Development

- No specific mathematical Learning Intentions.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- Develop an awareness of different cultures through imaginative play.
- Develop curiosity to investigate objects to develop characters both familiar and imaginative.

Physical Development

- Use controlled body movements to create a character through gesture.
- Know how to manipulate and control story props imaginatively and safely.

Creative development

- Respond to visual stimulus to develop creativity.
- Create and develop fantasy and real characters through role play.

The kit

An assortment of different masks, e.g. white "neutral" masks, a mask made out of straw, various animal masks, and pre-moulded plastic fluorescent superhero masks.

The masks session was instrumental in helping several children gain confidence, notably an autistic boy called Finley at Stoneygate, who became very engaged in playing with Amanda when she put on a monkey mask. Finley led “the monkey” round the nursery, as if he was playing the role of a teacher. According to what Finley’s mother had told his worker, he hadn’t wanted to participate in Halloween and dressing up in masks before. This was an important step illustrating the benefits of imaginative play with a more experienced, sensitive playfellow (i.e. Amanda).

“At one point, a worker said to a different child that the monkey was sad. I think Finley heard it because within a few minutes he came over and hugged the monkey – i.e. me, he had recognised another person/character’s feelings encouraging his emotional intelligence to develop.”¹²

Sophia, a play worker at Stoneygate, said that the session was “very beneficial”, and that she felt it was child-led and that the children responded well. She also mentioned that she wanted to get masks as a permanent acquisition for the children to play with.

It was observed that the masks workshop is a session that needs to be had once the children have got to know the artist. In the example of Finley, whose autism is behavioural, the mask was a way to develop empathy, which is a key component of emotional literacy. It should be mentioned that Finley did not just relate to the mask; he asked Amanda to *remove the mask* at one point, as if checking that it was indeed her. There were several other instances where the masks helped the children relate to a character that developed when the artists or other children wore a mask.

¹² ALO, Masks report, 23 October 2007.

“The masks were very popular, particularly those with animal faces, and enabled the children to experiment with different characters. They started to interact with each other a little using noises and animal movement.”¹³

Some children were frightened of the masks at first, requesting the artist to take it off.

At Wade Hall in Leyland, the hero masks were popular with the boys and chiefly served the purpose of pretending to be the hero. Whilst this was something that may have provoked some eye rolling (“so predictable!”) during our discussions afterwards, Liz never blocked this within the play. In fact, using her technique of laying everything out for the children to discover produced some interesting, unexpected results: the Leyland boys chose to use some of the masks as bandages for their imaginative play.

Hayli at Appletree noted how the masks were a good exercise for speech development as the children wanted to talk about the masks and ask and answer questions. She also observed that the children were really engaged with looking at themselves in the mirror with and without masks and liked to hold the mirror for themselves.¹⁴ This development of the *consciousness of the self* was also reflected in several children’s interest in taking and looking at digital photos at several of the other creative play sessions.

Recommendation

The inclusion of an extra mirror in the bag of masks would enable more children to have a look at themselves. The mirror might also be used for some of the other activities.

¹³ Angela Dixon, Masks report, November 2007.

¹⁴ HC, Masks report, 12 November 2007.

Shadow play

Learning Intentions

To engage the children in creating story worlds and scenes using a range of materials.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Co-operation and taking turns.
- Have confidence and perseverance to try new experiences.

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Develop story telling skills in a small group.
- To use appropriate story telling language.

Mathematical Development

- To develop a sense of shape and space.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- Use own experiences to enhance creativity and language skills.

Physical Development

- Develop fine motor skills – manipulating fingers, hand and arm.

Creative development.

- To use a range of materials to create pictures and patterns using a light source.
- Use music to enhance creative play.

The kit

- An overhead projector.
- An assortment of colour acetates, shadow puppets, bits of material, a basket lid, a pie dish, plastic shapes – both abstract and figurative.

Though there were some space restrictions that proved challenging (it was difficult to create a blackout from daylight, for instance), reactions from staff and children (as well as the artists!) to the shadow play were very positive.

“The potential for shadow work is staggering. It is definitely something I would consider. It would be nice to have something on the wall in a community centre that the children could explore. A light box that is safe and child friendly.”¹⁵

“I would never have thought an old OHP would be so enjoyable for the children. They love it.”¹⁶

There was plenty of scope for creative play that occurred during the shadows sessions. Here is an example from Stoneygate:

“Arif took great interest in patterns and shapes. The ship shape was then chosen by a child and this became a pirate ship which was sailing, then a pirate character was created who met a spider and then a ghost and then everything went orange.”¹⁷

Children were also touching their own shadows, another example of how they were engaging with their sense of self. There were opportunities to practice speech, discussing what shapes and objects emerged.

Music was important in combination with the shadow work and the children were very responsive. At Appletree, a girl called Grace was roaring like a lion at one point and when asked why she stated: “Because the music said, I am a lion.”

There was discussion about whether this activity suits different age levels in the group. Though the shadows session seems to allow for watching as well as developing story, Liz had an experience where three very young children were suddenly added to the play group. As a consequence, Harry, who was in the middle of building a story, was unable to finish this.

¹⁵ Amanda Spavin, in LFT, Shadow Play report, 22 November 2007.

¹⁶ LFT, Shadow Play report, 22 November 2007.

¹⁷ ALO, Shadow play report, 30 October 2007.

Arguably, physical play was more restricted in this session because of the activity taking place in a small space; it is difficult to get a larger space where a black-out from daylight can be created during the day. However, in all three early years settings having the OHP as a fixed light source helped the children focus and there was plenty of free-flow play.

Recommendations

It is best to work in a small group and have help available. In settings where there is a significant difference in age between children, reconsider how the session might be managed to meet age-appropriate needs. In any case, shadow play seems to be less suited for children under the age of three.

Transforming Objects

Learning Intentions

To select techniques needed to shape, assemble and join materials.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Self select activities and stay on task for increasing periods of time.
- To explore unfamiliar activities with confidence in a familiar setting.

Communication, Language and Literacy.

- Communicate new ideas in a 1:1 situation.
- Develop a widening vocabulary for discussion, learning and experiences.

Mathematical Development

- Begin to use everyday words to describe position.
- Use developing mathematical ideas to solve practical problems.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- Use own experiences to enhance creativity and language skills.
- Use knowledge of how things work to transform everyday objects.
- Develop fine motor skills – manipulating fingers, hand and arm.
- To engage in activities which require hand/eye coordination.

Creative development

- Understand that different materials can be combined creatively.
- To develop confidence in experimenting with different media without an end product.

The kit

- Everyday items from the home such as jugs, funnels, dustpan and brush, wooden spoons, tea towels, rubber gloves etc.
- Stick-on eyes of different shapes and sizes.

The children enjoyed this session as they instantly recognised objects from the home. At the beginning, they were keen to name the items, use them as realistic props and let the play workers know for what they are used. When introduced to the possibility of sticking eyes onto the objects, some really engaged with the new characters, where others were content playing with the objects and the eyes.

“One boy put all the eyes into a sieve and pretended they were fish, and let me fish with a spoon.”¹⁸

At Stoneygate, there was a boy who decided a plastic jug was the home for a corkscrew. Sometimes the eyes wouldn't stick to certain objects, which would frustrate the children. Fortunately, in those instances, glue or sticky tape came to the rescue.

It was observed how the children had a real sense of ownership, and how they would like to take home what they created. They did not always understand that the objects needed to go back to DNA.

“Alex was engrossed in building an accelerator using a ladle, garlic press, pegs and lots of tape “to make it strong and go 90% fast”... At home time Alex was proudly walking out with his accelerator. I explained that I would take a photograph but that the objects belonged to Hayli. He seemed happy with that but the following day he asked again why he couldn't take it because he had made it.”¹⁹

The example of Alex and his accelerator is reminiscent of a project run for reception age children in early 2007 by North Tyneside Early Arts called “The House of Objects”.

¹⁸ HC, Transforming Objects report, 26 November 2007.

¹⁹ Angela Dixon, Transforming Objects report, November 2007.

“The project gave 1000 children, their practitioners and parents an opportunity to develop their creative expression through access to a range of tools and interesting and unusual reclaimed materials. ... a key finding was the positive impact of this experience on the boys’ dispositions to learning, by enabling them to explore such a wide range of imaginative materials in this ‘warehouse of wonders’. The children were given freedom and encouragement, autonomy and responsibility, and time and space to explore the resources, making use of the indoor and outdoor environment.”²⁰

Future instalments of the Transforming Objects session could provide a particular opportunity to encourage and engage boys. At Leyland, Liz made the following observation about her four boys:

“I have noticed that once the boys get it into their heads that they are going on an adventure – nothing can stop them. They very quickly pick up objects and improvise their use. It may not be what WE intended but they go with and fully believe that a teapot can be a steering wheel for a submarine. Their reaction to new objects is immediate. Objects become monsters, fish, aliens and of course HEROES.”²¹

This treatment of objects as props for story-telling seems to be a natural onward development from heuristic play of the under threes.

“Heuristic play ‘consists of offering a group of children, for a defined period of time in a controlled environment, a large number of different kinds of objects and receptacles with which they play freely without adult intervention’.”²²

The boys’ play at Leyland was far more narrative-driven but their immediate reaction to and engagement with new objects is something

²⁰ *Confident, Capable and Creative - Supporting Boys' Achievements*, Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage, p. 8.

²¹ LFT, Transforming Objects report, 29 November 2007.

²² <http://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/c/resourcesuk/articles/cpd/heuristicplay.htm>

that may perhaps be worth exploring further in this light.

There were positive sounds from staff about the Transforming Objects session as well, and I particularly note the observation from one of the managers that simple objects can be an affordable way to help children develop their creative play.

“It is interesting for staff to realise that you don’t need special equipment. I can see the potential for development with the everyday objects.”²³

Recommendations

It would be good if the mystery box of objects included an object making activity where the children can take home their product, e.g. the wooden spoon puppets.

Also, further exploration of how the work with everyday objects can be expanded to encourage boys in the play.

²³ From discussion with Joanna Morris, Stoneygate.

Finger puppets

Learning Intentions

To use puppets to explore imaginative ideas and feelings.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Co-operation and taking turns in role-play.
- Have confidence and perseverance to try new experiences.

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Develop story telling skills in a small group.
- Develop confidence in using appropriate story telling language.

Mathematical Development

- Develop the use of positional language.
- Use language for size in a practical situation.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- Develop confidence in a new situation – speaking out in a large group.
- Use puppets to explore feelings of self and others.

Physical Development

- Develop fine motor skills – manipulating fingers, hand and arm.
- Develop hand/eye co-ordination.

Creative development

- Communicate ideas through imaginative play.
- Create small world characters and use to recreate stories.

The kit

- A range of finger puppets.
- A larger, fluffy rabbit hand puppet.
- “Blank” finger puppets for drawing on/ decorating.
- A small toy puppet booth.

Play workers at Stoneygate were positive about the creative play in this session, observing that particularly the quiet children responded extremely well.

“Fatima drew a picture of a puppet calling it her sister she gave the picture hands and features, she has never drawn an actual picture before (only patterns).”²⁴

“It was noted that Hamza was given much more freedom than perhaps the play worker would have given, that she has been more cautious. She felt the free play really worked and wants to aim to do that more herself. She also noted that there was a free flow of play and the children naturally rotated themselves and moved into other areas of the nursery.”²⁵

The children played with the puppet booth though only sometimes using it as a booth. At Appletree, three boys used it to create a travel scenario based upon the train image that was painted on the front.

“Jaydon and Reece used appropriate voices and language to create characters and a story around them involving travel and parties. They moved their play into the wooden doll’s house and continued playing for about 15 minutes.”²⁶

At Leyland, Liz used the booth as a puppet booth, and her group of boys explored performing and being audience members.

“The puppet booth became a bit of an argument-inducing prop. Harry wanted to use the booth properly, whereas the other boys were quite happy for it to be many different things. There were some lovely moments though – each boy had the chance to tell his

²⁴ ALO, Finger Puppets report, 13 November 2007.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Angela Dixon, Finger Puppets report, December 2007.

story behind the booth, and they enjoyed it tremendously. The boys also enjoyed being “audience members.” And mimicked sitting still, ready for the performance. They also clapped at the end.”²⁷

The puppet sessions at all three locations gave opportunities for longer play in smaller groups.

Several children enjoyed making their own finger puppet though they did not seem to play with them much afterwards.

Recommendations

It would be good to develop further crafting activities or creative notes for providers with puppet-making ideas whilst bearing in mind that the creative play is the aim and that making can take over the session. Children enjoy ownership of the puppets and often expect to be able to take them home. Also, it is recommended to have more than one sturdier booth.

²⁷ LFT, Finger Puppets report, 13 December 2007.

Balloons

Learning Intentions

To engage confidently in new activities and initiate and explore new ideas.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Co-operation and taking turns.
- Have confidence and perseverance to try new experiences.

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Respond to simple instructions.
- To communicate own needs using just words.

Mathematical Development

- To develop a sense of shape and space.
- Explore three-dimensional shapes.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

- Show an interest in why things happen and how things work.
- To show an awareness of change in materials.

Physical Development

- To manipulate materials by picking up and releasing.
- To move objects with control and co-ordination.

Creative development

- To explore shape and form in 3 dimensions.
- To answer questions about own imaginative play.

The kit

- Different shapes and size balloons, not yet inflated. One of the artists brought in heart-shaped balloons.
- Marker pens for drawing on faces.
- A pump for inflating balloons.

The balloons session was a high-energy session, full of excitement and anticipation. The artists and some key workers blew up the balloons and

then used these to engage in play with the children, who had plenty of creative ideas!

“Hamza pretended his balloon was a snake, a house, a rainbow, a necklace and glasses.”²⁸

At Appletree the children were fascinated by the process of blowing up balloons.

“They showed surprise when each balloon started to take shape, even though they seemed to know what will happen ... especially the first moment when the balloon has just one ‘lump’ created in it. Blowing up the balloons is quite a hard thing to do, but I feel that the children liked the element of achieving something themselves or being helped rather than the quickness that an adult could do it for them.”²⁹

Experiments with static were also popular:

They rubbed the balloons on their hair and watched the hair being lifted. ... They rubbed the balloons on their jumpers and stuck the balloons to the walls with the static.³⁰

Again, the issue of ownership came up, with the children wanting to take their balloons home with them.

The timing of several of the balloons sessions seems to have been close to Christmas and there were several other things going on. There was a feeling that this is an activity that can get the children quite stimulated and probably needs to be followed by some quiet time.

²⁸ ALO, Balloons report, 27 November 2007.

²⁹ HC, Balloons report, 17 December 2007.

³⁰ HC, Balloons report, 17 December 2007.

Recommendations

The kit needs to include a second pump and/ or have a few balloons blown up already. It would also be good to have different kinds of balloons, different shapes, modelling balloons/ stickers etc.

Balls, hoops and cloth³¹

Learning Intentions

To engage confidently in new activities and initiate and explore new ideas.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Co-operation and taking turns.
- Have confidence and perseverance to try new experiences.
- Share and co-operate when using resources.

Communication, Language and Literacy

- Talking and listening to others.
- To communicate own needs using just words.

Mathematical Development.

- To develop a sense of shape and space.
- Explore three-dimensional shapes.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World.

- Show an interest in why things happen and how things work.
- Investigate a range of materials using appropriate senses.

Physical Development

- To move objects with control and co-ordination.

Creative development

- To explore shape and form in three dimensions.
- To answer questions about own imaginative play.

The kit

Cylindrical cushions, hoops and cloth materials.

³¹ This final session was only held at Stoneygate in Preston due to time constraints.

The kit originates from the interactive play sessions accompanying DNA's production for early years of 'Ball Pond Bobby' using soft cylindrical cushions as well as different kinds of balls, hoops and cloth.

This session had plenty of opportunities for physical as well as imaginative play. The boys in particular liked knocking over the soft building blocks.

"Kacper responded very well. He is Polish and finds it difficult to speak English. He was very excited and his enjoyment was evident, he liked building with the bricks and liked experimenting with everything he could find. He was very physical with his play, he became a monster and made noises, he liked creating towers and then knocking them down, and he used the plastic animals to role play with me including the crocodile which he pretended was biting me."

"Karishma was creative with the stimulus she used the items to build and she created different scenarios such as going to the Doctors, being a wizard etc. I role-played with her such as being a patient. ... Sarah was watching and it seemed like she wanted to join in but didn't actually make the move to. I went over to where she was playing and commented on how good her painting was and talked about why it was good and she seemed to brighten with the praise. Later she came over to the area where we read the book and we all pretended the tub was a cauldron and made a broth. Karishma became the witch and used the material. Unfortunately, at this point a play worker took Sarah to have some fruit but I felt that this had been a break through for her as this is the first time she has participated in a session."³²

Sarah was participating in the session for the first time but a play worker took her to have some fruit at a key moment in the middle of the play. Is it possible to reach agreements with play workers that in such situations

³² ALO, Balls, Hoops and Cloth report, 20 November 2007.

they stay back? Could it be possible to set up an agreed signal where the artist can indicate that, in that particular moment, routine is worth breaking?

“High-level play is a fragile thing. It is easily damaged before it gets underway, if the atmosphere does not help it along.”³³

Feedback from key workers included an acknowledgment that boys need more of a physical outlet for play. Stoneygate may acquire similar soft sculpted building blocks as these have been excellent.

Recommendation

Some of the children were fascinated that some of the balls had a smell – this could be developed further to create an olfactory kit possibly using herbs.

³³ Tina Bruce, *Learning Through Play* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), p. 120.

Further thoughts and observations

Preconceptions

The artists and I noticed when addressing the artists or me, key workers sometimes mentioned things such as: "He always pushes in" or "She's a very quiet child". Whether unwittingly or no, certain preconceived notions/labels are being repeated while the child is within earshot. I did not know about Finley's autism and, though my experience with children on the autistic spectrum is limited, I would never have guessed he was autistic the way he ran off with the masks.³⁴ Perhaps these preconceptions stem from insecurities of having visitors enter the school, and workers feel the need to "explain" the children's behaviour. Sometimes having a context is helpful (such as knowing that the child is having a difficult time at home), on other occasions, however, it can be restricting.

Also, there were a few instances where the workers as well as the artists tried to second-guess the children and pre-empted their responses. Instead of asking "what it might be?" or letting the children explain themselves what they had imagined, both artists and workers would insert their own interpretation, e.g. repeating back: "Oh you are [going to the beach], are you?" or "Ah, you've made a [sun]!" The feedback from the artists mentioned that they were ever alert to these instances and gradually changed their own behaviour. I would hope that key workers also picked up on this and that they have the same process type of reflection.

"I know the children very well now and was expecting the boys to create swords with the balloons. Yes, immediately, they became swords, but very quickly turned into tickling sticks."³⁵

³⁴ See section on masks, p. 18-19.

³⁵ LFT, Balloons report, 3 January 2008.

"I was conscious of when the children asked me what type of mask it was that I asked them 'what type of mask do you think it is?' – this allowed the children to make their own decisions – for example one boy thought that one mask was a kangaroo and it was clearly a giraffe, but that's what he wanted it to be."³⁶

Numbers

The One O'Clock Club at Leyland turned out to be a 'small boys club', with four boys between the ages of 2-4. Amanda worked with between 20-25 children and Hayli usually had around 12. From the feedback it emerged that the artists sometimes felt they were not able to give full attention to every child. Though the Leyland boys received a great deal of individual attention, sometimes, there were too many adults present during the play sessions. As a consequence, the children were perhaps less able to engage in play with one other.

Space

Something that emerged very clearly from the work is that boys in particular need more space to explore free-flow play. At Leyland, due to part of the Sure Start being taken over by a private nursery, the children mostly played inside a small room without a window. This rather put the onus on Liz to engage with the children and left them little space to explore for themselves. Apart from the DNA stimuli that Liz had brought in, there sometimes were only a set of floor mats to use for play (i.e. there frequently were no other toys already in the room).

Having both an indoor and an outdoor space available is a real advantage. At Appletree, they have impressive facilities with a large outdoor playing area that includes a large climbing frame, stepping stones and a sandpit. During the environments session, I was able to observe the children make full use of the space. Interestingly, they were particularly sensitive to the

³⁶ HC, Masks report, 12 November 2007.

elements, moving and playing with the wind: something that simply could not have happened indoors. Also in Amanda's session,

"[t]here was a running theme of water with the children including sea, paddling pool, elephants spraying water, swimming, washing hair, which led to hairdressing. At one point some children decided to sing the fish song that was up on the wall we then all decided to be fishes."³⁷

Gender specific spaces

At the Stoneygate masks session, it was noticed how a group of girls played more confidently in one area of the nursery, inviting Amanda over for a tea party.

At Appletree, the boys had their own particular area where they played with bricks. It was interesting to observe that, due to space constraints, this is where the shadow play session took place and that it largely drew confident children.

What can we learn from these unplanned gender specific play areas? The building brick area at Appletree was the same space that was used for the shadow play. During this session there were predominantly boys who were engaging with the play. Did the girls perhaps not want to go to this area because they viewed it as the boys' domain? Is there a way of using these spaces to our advantage, by deliberating planning certain activities there?

"Are practitioners aware of the choices boys and girls make? Observe how boys and girls use your environment, then take action in the light of your findings to ensure it is as inviting to boys as it is to girls and equally supported by practitioners."³⁸

³⁷ ALO, *Creating Environments* report, 16 October 2007.

³⁸ *Confident, Capable and Creative*, p. 10.

DNA and artists going into early years settings need to be aware of possible gender specific areas, as locating an activity in a particular area could be making a statement of sorts.

Timing

Halloween and the lead up to Christmas influenced some of the choices and the behaviour of the children. Also, in the run-up to Christmas, there were many other activities that were going on, resulting in children becoming quite excitable and sometimes their attention having to be divided.

It was also observed that it could be an interesting alternative to have started the project later in the year, i.e. not at the beginning of the autumn term, when many children are still settling in, but in the spring.

Documentation

Documentation of the sessions in writing was good, with the artists providing regular reports on their work. At Appletree, we were fortunate enough to have Angela Dixon also documenting her version of events. Having an insider's point of view in the nurseries is invaluable and, where possible, it would be great to have one or more key workers writing regular documentation as well. The learning diaries that were kept at both Stoneygate and Appletree were an additional source of documentation for the project, helping show evidence of continuity in the learning process and how the Imaginary Leaps project contributed to this..

Future instalments of the project could have more structured discussion with play workers, written questionnaires, and more written reports from play workers.

A project funding application needs to include a dedicated, sturdy, user friendly digital camera that can be used by the artists, staff and the children themselves.

Staff at the centres would benefit from basic training in using a video camera as there was neither expertise nor time to sort out a short bit of film that was shot during the first week of the project.

Other outcomes

Improved confidence

Staff and artists noticed children's confidence gradually improved during the Creative Play sessions.

"Aliya played with Iman. Iman is normally the second to join in but she was first up!"³⁹

"Hamza – started to build the environment/den but he seemed to display negative feelings about himself: "I can't do it". He repeated this a few times. I reassured him and gave him praise and shrieked "this is fun!" He engaged well and created characters, e.g. a werewolf."

"Grace, who initiated a lot of play during this session, often is with a friend in nursery, who is more dominating than her and therefore in today's session she was able to express her own ideas and wants."⁴⁰

"The workshops have been a great confidence booster for Sam. We have never given him credit for being creative. We are now looking at ways that Sam can be engaged that is creative and totally different from what I would expect from him. His sisters are easy to engage with paper and pens, but Sam wants to "be the character". I want to play to his strengths."⁴¹

Sharing

The artists' reports contain many instances of positive sharing between the children.

³⁹ ALO, Creating Environments report, 16 October 2007.

⁴⁰ HC, Creating Environments report, 5 November 2007.

⁴¹ Sam's mother, quoted in LFT, 19 December 2007.

"Jaequarn had shared, which he normally finds difficult."⁴²

"Harry has loved the sessions. I have noticed that he has begun to "share play" with his brother Freddie. Harry would normally play alone but he has begun to share the space."⁴³

It is interesting to compare this with a statement his mother made at the beginning of the first session.

"My family laughed at me bringing Harry today. He certainly doesn't need more drama people to stimulate him."⁴⁴

It was not always possible to have open communications (supporting continuity in the learning process) with children's parents/ carers, which sometimes resulted in the artist coming into the school (and sometimes the key workers!) being left second-guessing why a child was in a particular mood. It takes time to build a trusting relationship and an artist who comes in for two hours a week may not always be in the know about what goes on in children's home lives for instance. Having open communications can sometimes also be difficult when parents are from a different cultural background or when they speak little English, which was sometimes the case in Stoneygate. In this light, and without wanting to take away from the excellent work of the artists involved in the pilot projects (who were all female and white), DNA might also wish to consider how the sessions would be different if led by artists who are from a variety of ethnic, cultural and gender backgrounds.

⁴² ALO, Very Hungry Caterpillar report, 9 October 2007.

⁴³ LFT, feedback from Harry's mother, 3 January 2008.

⁴⁴ ALO, Very Hungry Caterpillar report, 9 October 2007.

CONCLUSION

The Imaginary Leaps project has been a positive experience for the children at Appletree, Stoneygate and Wade Hall in Leyland. Several children really developed their learning while the artists were coming into the nurseries. They benefited in a number of ways, including:

- Many of the sessions appeared to help build confidence
- There was evidence that working with masks helped an autistic child experience empathy
- The work helped children to learn how to share
- Boys were able to express their particular play needs during the creating environments, balls, hoops and cloth, and transforming everyday objects sessions (amongst others)

Staff witnessed positive examples of how creative play can be used with the children and several settings have already implemented some of the ideas offered by the artists. For most of the project partners, the relatively low financial cost was a decisive factor in the uptake of the project. It was perceived as positive that the project was an affordable opportunity for Early Years settings to bring in artists.

“An advantage was that DNA were not too expensive. We have little money to bring in artists. Funding is an issue.”⁴⁵

Not only was quality play provided by experienced artists but the creative kits offered concrete ideas that could be implemented in the early years settings at relatively little cost (e.g. everyday objects). At Stoneygate, they now have their own den building kit and Appletree have changed the area that was originally used for shadow play into a darkened room.

⁴⁵ Interview with Angela at Stoneygate Children’s Centre.

“The brick area has since been made into a dark den and the children have been playing with torches which they are really enjoying – lots of shadows and ‘monster hands’.”⁴⁶

The kits were not without problems: the logistics of co-ordinating which artist had the kit were sometimes tricky, there were a few potential health and safety issues with objects that had not been specifically been designed for play by young children. The artists mentioned how they enjoyed having been handed a mystery kit of which they had not yet seen the contents, though the advantage of knowing what was in the kit was that it provided inspiration for the inclusion of other materials.

In all three settings, finally, but particularly in Leyland, the observation was made how boys need space to express their play needs. Amanda Spavin, who is a manager at Wade Hall, expressed her learning curve about this.

“I feel now that the boys having a book with a few props to play with is not enough. They need to go into the story. The boys need more space and freedom to really get their creativity going. This is what they are getting with the DNA sessions. I would stop the play sometimes because it feels chaotic. I need to learn that it is not chaotic, it is creative.”⁴⁷

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Phase 3 of the Imaginary Leaps project will take place during spring term 2009. Feedback has indicated that the timing of the project would work better once the children have had a chance to settle in. Further plans for development:

- DNA will be looking to get funding for longer training with Early Years Providers and Artists.

⁴⁶ Angela Dixon, Shadow Play report, January 2008.

⁴⁷ Amanda Spavin, quoted in LFT, 6 December 2007.

- The kits will be developed and include (some specific) toys that are safe for play.
- There are also plans to train more artists in Lancashire, who can then target settings where there is currently little creative development. The early years settings involved in the pilot were already quite informed about creative play. DNA will be thinking of strategies for rolling out the programme and introducing it into those nurseries and Sure Starts who need it most.
- Imaginary Leaps will continue to meet development streams from the Early Stepping Stones and Foundation Stage.
- DNA intends to produce a Creative Play workshop guide that can be used in Early Years settings.
- Finally, work will continue with Early Years development groups including the Preschool Learning Alliance and the Early Years Arts Council Champions group.

Questions for further discussion

- When does free-flow play become too free?⁴⁸
- How can an artist or key worker model sensible behaviour whilst maintaining creativity?
- What are the boundaries of the adults involved in the play?
- How familiar should artists be with the language of education?

⁴⁸ At Leyland, the mats are normally used to sit on for quiet time. A worry was expressed that some of the boys may now expect to play with the mats but if they do they will be told off.

Appendix i

ARTISTS' STATEMENTS AFTER THE PILOT

Hayli

During this project I benefited from knowledge of early years practice and creative play from the support and training of DNA.

I was able to explore this creative play on an experimental level within a supportive environment, and as part of a team of artists and play-workers, albeit in different environments.

I benefited from becoming conscious of the role of the facilitator and of the opportunity to break habitual role patterns that I as an artist may have.

I particularly benefited from learning more about children's play and what external factors affect children's development, as well as the difference between adult and children's perception of imaginative play.

Amanda

The Imaginary Leaps project has been a real learning curve for me. I have had training and extensive experience of working with children on many varied creative projects of all ages. With this particular age group, in the past, I have provided workshops where I have led as well as participated as a leader in role (i.e. I become a character myself and would act) and there was a specific learning agenda. I have worked from the basis of a structured workshop plan which always remained open to change and of course open to the children's or young people's creativity that it intends to encourage. However to approach a session without a

plan or idea of which stimuli it would be for me was a little bit out of my comfort zone. From this I learnt to embrace free play and completely child led activities that were both enlightening and inspiring to experience. From researching Tina Bruce I learnt the importance of free play and could see results in the work that I did with Stoneygate Nursery. Notably the project increased confidence in many children and also extended and challenged the play of the more confident children. It was interesting trying to gauge the fine line between supporting and extending play without taking control. Learning to be a "play catalyst", create a stimulating environment, while acknowledging the children's play agendas. Encouraging rich play, but to know when to take a step back to observe and let it happen. I look forward to using and developing the knowledge I have gained and found it overall a rewarding and interesting experience.

Liz

First of all, I absolutely loved my 8 weeks working in Wade Hall Children's Centre in Leyland. Although the group was small, I felt this was an ideal situation for me, and the fact that the participants were all boys was quite unique.

I feel very strongly, and this particular experience has confirmed my belief - that an "artist" should enter a space as an artist and not be tempted over a period of time, to become a "teacher". It is so easy to start looking for an outcome, rather than inspiring children and young people with the artist's form. I tried really hard to allow the boys to explore whatever stimulus I had introduced, in their own way, at their own pace. There were moments when I must have manipulated the situation, but I tried very hard not to. I believe that this gives a stronger foundation for children to explore creatively.

However, this style of working takes a massive amount of patience as it takes time for children to tap into their own creative energy. So, I learnt patience too!

I am very used to working with boys - but not really experienced in working with the under 5s. This has been a startling revelation to me, and answers a huge amount of questions I have about the male psyche (total generalisation here). The boys were ego centric - they wanted to be "in the story" the whole time. Each child - with the exception of Jacob - wanted to be the central character of their own story. Harry - having the strongest personality - continually battled to tell "his story." The boys also needed room to run around, rough and tumble and be extremely physical in their creative process. A large amount of space with plenty of light is crucial for boys to thrive creatively.

Boys need a break! They need to cool down, re-group themselves, otherwise they wind themselves up like clocks until they burn out. I learnt to gauge when this was necessary.

Guns, knives and fighting weapons are part of a boys "play". And as much as I don't like it, I felt that they almost had to "get their own frustrations out of the way" through hero play, before they became incredibly beautiful in their storytelling. I have learnt not to block this process, but to go with it until it has exhausted itself. This took less and less time each week.

Finally, my excitement of continuing to work with this group is very strong. I wonder what would happen if an artist worked for a longer period of time with the group. It would be fantastic if the group grew organically, with children wanting to be part of something really quite wonderful.

Appendix ii

NURSERY CURRICULUM

Appletree Nursery focuses on six Nursery Curriculum areas⁴⁹, which have been included for each section of the evaluation. The six areas are:

Personal Social and Emotional Development

Children learn about their feelings and how to get on with others. They learn to be part of a bigger group of people and about the needs of other people.

They learn to look after their own needs.

They learn to share and take turns.

Mathematical Development

Children learn about numbers and counting.

They learn to use language about more than, less, longer, wider.

They learn the names of shapes and how to make patterns.

Communication, Language and Literacy

Children learn new words.

They learn how to talk and listen to others.

They learn how to express their ideas and thoughts about things.

They learn to enjoy looking at books.

They learn about reading and writing.

Knowledge and Understanding of the World

Children learn about their own and other peoples lives. They enjoy

⁴⁹Appletree's nursery curriculum:

<http://www.appletreechildrenscentre.co.uk/nurseryourcurriculum.htm>

celebrating and finding out about festivals: Christmas, Eid, Diwali, Chinese New Year, Autumn, Spring.

They learn about sequence of the seasons and the wonders of nature.

They learn about the sequence of the seasons and the wonders of nature.

They learn to ask questions.

They learn to explore and investigate.

They learn how to use computers, cameras, tape recorders, programmable toys.

Physical Development

Children learn about how their bodies work.

They learn about how to keep healthy.

They enjoy running and climbing outdoors.

They learn how to use tools safely and skilfully.

Creative Development

Children enjoy trying a wide ranging of painting, drawing and making activities.

They enjoy making and moving to music.

They enjoy dressing up and being some one new.

They learn about colours.

They learn about materials.

They learn that they can do wonderful new things.