

ReFocus Journal

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How do you catch the essence of young children's artistic and creative thinking – which like moonbeams can be elusive and ephemeral?

How do artists and educators work with young children to create contexts and environments to encourage the moonbeams to shine and not disappear?

These were the questions which excited and held our learning community made up of educators children, artists, pedagogues, researchers, parents, together for two years in Birmingham. Here is just one story, which tries to answer some of the questions...



In The Jungle with the

The two nursery practitioners (Rachel Roberts and Shabana Saddique) and I wanted to have a clear starting point for our Moonbeams project that was flexible enough to follow the emerging interests of the children yet structured in a way that we, as practitioners and artist could learn about the children we were working with and our roles within their learning. The project was to take place one morning per week over twenty weeks and each morning was divided into two sessions, one spent working alongside the children, another session to review and reflect upon the session.

Meeting and beginning

The outside area at Adderley was split in two with a large play area suitable for bikes and climbing frames whilst the other area was a garden area with enclosed spaces, trees, willow structures, and tunnels. This garden area was referred to by both the staff and the children as “The Jungle” and was often used as a resource for learning about the outdoors. The children had all weather suits and wellington boots and explored this area throughout the year. However, both Rachel and Shabana thought that the nursery practitioners at Adderley mainly used ‘the jungle’ as a place of planned, adult framed learning and

“Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before.”

LORIS MAGALUZZI

considered that maybe, if they observed the children first then they could better tune into the thinking and interests of the children.

To test the idea we decided to begin our project with careful observations on how the children used, inhabited, and transformed this outside space. We could then consider how the children's outside experiences could then be supported both inside and outside.

Armed with digital cameras, video, and notebooks we took small groups of about eight children at a time outside from the family groups of the nursery (all aged between 3/4, into ‘the jungle’. These children chose to participate from an array of experiences both inside and outside the nursery.

Groups and Ideas begin to emerge

Over a period of several weeks, a core group of children emerged of four boys Jerard, Zayd, Sher, Aryaan, and five girls Remayah, Ayesha, Hannah, Elizabeth, and Sanam. These children continually wanted to explore outside and follow up ideas from previous weeks sessions such as making collections of sticks, standing them upright to make more trees for within their jungle. Investigating the changing contents of builder's trays left out in all weathers to gather treasures of muddy puddles, icy lakes and dust and dirt and to keep track of the bugs and beasts they found dwelling in rotting logs of ‘the jungle’. Other children throughout the project dropped in and out over the twenty weeks but the core group remained and became the focus of our Moonbeams project.

Observing and Listening

At the end of each session, the practitioners and I reviewed the photographs, video, and notes together. We reflected on what we thought the children were engaged with, identifying the focus of their learning, what relationships might be evolving amongst the children, reflecting on our roles and anticipating and planning our next steps either to make further observations or devise encounters, provocations or experiences to explore with the group.

During initial visits to the garden area, I made a map to record the children's thoughts and actions on the different areas of the garden. I wanted to see which areas were important to them.

The white and black birds

Remayah took my hand and lead me away from the main group. She took me to a patch of trees and knelt down on the floor holding my hand. I knelt down beside her not asking her why we were there but just taking time to be with her. She had not said anything, but it was clear she wanted to show me something. With her other hand she pointed at some trees on the opposite side of the garden and whispered in my ear "This is where I look for the white and black birds". Remayah was not comfortable to share her thoughts initially with the whole group present but she found a way to make sure she was heard. Following this tiny moment, Remayah

...and a provocation, an intervention

...some adult ideas get their come-uppance!

We planned an encounter for the children to discover. We had observed how much of the children's play seemed to focus on monkeys and we wondered if by placing bananas outside, amongst the trees and the stones and the places where the monkeys inhabited, would this prompt a response from the children and extend their imaginary play? We anticipated that maybe, the bananas would be the proof needed for the imaginary monkeys to become real somehow. However, the children encountered the bananas with much delight. They spent time, looking for the bananas hidden in places within the jungle and when they found one, simply placed it on the floor and with much enthusiasm and gusto, simply stamped on them and turned them into a mulch, leaving the mess and moving on quickly to find the next one. So much for our ideas and observations! At first, we were devastated, had we misread the signs and interests of the children?

Learning a lesson

At the end of this session, we sat down and reflected upon the encounter between the bananas and the children. Several ideas emerged within this discussion. The bananas had been our adult idea that we thought might interest the children but we realised the significance of placing the

Children of Adderley

became a core member of the group and was always keen to show me the things of interest to her. Her confidence was growing each time we went outside. The initial visits to the garden area also seemed to reveal the group's interests in stories and make-believe.

A place of energy

Sher, in particular would use the large flat stones, buried in the floor of the jungle almost like a stage, to tell stories about the monkeys he thought might live in the trees.

"You know, when the monkeys go up in the trees, they jump, and when the monkey sees me, with a smile on his face he goes to the toilet (laughs loudly). The monkeys had to sing about it, sing, sing all about it, (pointing at the rocks). The monkey had to sing about the rocks, and they walked across them and if they fell off, so they got killed."

We noticed how inside, Sher was often very quiet, playing on his own or quietly alongside others, however, outside he was a leader, with a loud, powerful voice and he loved how the other children would listen to him.

Adult observations lead to hypotheses ...

The association of the children to the garden as being a jungle seemed to invite a response from them, to play games looking for tigers and chasing monkeys, yet weaved within this play were other games of playing school, of looking of what lay underneath a log and making trails and paths through the overgrown ivy. We wondered if their perception of what constituted a jungle was based on familiar stories and songs.

Interesting questions emerged at this part of the project for our consideration. What is a jungle for the children at Adderley? What is the relationship between the children and outside? These questions helped us to frame our thinking and make better decisions of where to go next.

bananas in the jungle was a way of proving the monkey's existence, not for the children but for us, as adults instead. The children did not need proof, it was their imaginary game, and they were very good at devising and making up their own rules for this game too. We also reflected on our assumption of the monkey stories and the games being of interest to the whole group and we realised that not all of the children were involved in the game of looking for monkeys, just some, and we may have missed out and misread the interests of the other children within the group.

Looking anew at the children's culture

It was at this point that our documentation processes began to change slightly and we used the video camera, increasingly to capture the children at the edge of the core group and to follow individual children throughout sessions that we felt we might miss otherwise. By contemplating and returning to the question of 'What is a jungle for the children at Adderley' we began to understand that the term 'jungle' was simply a name given to an area of land that for the children looked like a jungle. We were not sure if the name first came from the children or the staff but the term was continually passing from year group to year group from both the children and staff. The jungle meant different things to the different children and we were desperately trying to find a theme to link all the individual members of the group together. The bananas were our intervention to maybe create this connecting theme, but it was based on assumptions that were not true of all children. However, an impending event, out of our control was about to happen that would shape the rest of the project. The jungle area was going to disappear to make way for a new baby unit.

In the Jungle with the Children of Adderley

...and a big encounter

The jungle area was fenced off and the whole nursery gathered outside to watch the first trees come down and as the first tree fell, the children all cheered. This surprised the staff as it had been anticipated that they might be upset to see their 'jungle' disappear. The upset mood came from the adults, who realised just how long it takes to grow a tree. (Later work, however, revealed that amongst the children there was upset, even though it was not apparent at the time.)

Children respond to the destruction

Remayah was spotted later in the week holding two sticks upright in the ground, when she was asked what she was doing; she said, "I am making new trees". Jerard explained to me, when he saw me next that "the trees have been chopped down to make room for a new noonit [unit] for the adults" and Zayd said in response to Jerard "but we gonna grow baby trees in the car park". This idea came from working with Wendy, the teacher who had suggested the children could grow new trees, from seeds in pots, which could then be planted in the staff car park. I was interested in Remayah's idea of making new trees and wondered if we could propose her ideas to the rest of the children, to extend the idea of making new trees and to see how the children would go about the idea of making a new jungle. This in turn would help us to understand what the jungle is, for the children at Adderley.

The Classroom as a resource of encounter

At the same time as the trees coming down, a new room had been built elsewhere at Adderley, which was to become a new and additional creative area, with the idea of using it for ongoing projects and constructions. The new room became the focus place for exploring the experiences from outside now that we were unable to use the outside spaces either because it was no longer there, or because the outside spaces that were left intact were generally being used by the builders and were no longer accessible for the children.

The new room was a blank canvas, contained nothing, and was unlike any of the other spaces within Adderley. Another emerging interest of ours was to see how this room could be used with the children by observing and experimenting with its layout and use during the project. The overhead projector became a useful tool to explore the outside space in a different way. Transparencies of photographs taken outside were projected onto the walls and the children were able to enter into these light pictures and change the images, transforming the inside environment.

At a later stage, I collected objects from outside, and laid these in the space for the children to find. I was interested to see what they would do with them. I had noticed during previous sessions how the group were beginning to realise the potential of making large shadows upon the wall using their fingers and hands and so the outside objects became a provocation to see if they would make the link to creating different types of shadows using the twigs, leaves and grasses provided. Compositional shadows were made by layering the materials and children often asked for these to be photographed. In subsequent sessions, children went out to collect their own resources to use on the OHP. Sometimes, large sheets of paper were taped to the walls so graphic marks and representations could mingle with the shadow compositions.

The photographs and transparencies we had taken and collected whilst being outside became a valuable resource for remembering and thinking about outside, especially when it had gone. On one such occasion, a small group were working together at a table using sticks, stones and wood chip to represent their memories of what outside looked like before it got chopped down. A video of them outside was playing in the background and photographs were available in a book on the side for them to look at.



Representing and re-encountering 'the jungle' and its destruction

Materials and equipment were gathered on the tables - clay, boards, twigs, woodchip, and stones but there was no adult suggestion of how to make the jungle using the materials, but we had anticipated what they might do by focusing on what they did with the sticks when outside. I reminded the group of what Remayah had said when standing two sticks up in the ground. "I am making new trees". I said I had found her idea interesting and wondered how we could make new trees together.

Zayd "We can use the sticks to the make the jungle" [holding them upright in his hand against the table, but when he lets go, the twigs fall over]

Ayesha "I'm gonna make the jungle, these are the leaves" [small balls of clay she had rolled in her hand] "I'm gonna put these on the trees."



Naylor “We went to the jungle” [looking at the video] “Look, there’s me!” Ayesha [looking at video she notices and reassesses her assumption that the leaves should be on the trees] “The leaves are not on the trees, they are on the floor, we must do the floor first, no monkeys yet, the floor’s not finished”. [Ayesha begins to use the balls of clay as a thick clay base on the boards]

Zayd [Watches Ayesha with the clay and places one of the sticks upright in the clay base she has begun to create.]

Sher “We need three rocks in the jungle, and trees...monkeys... bananas... a gate...trees...house [Sher begins to list the ‘ingredients’ which for him make up the jungle.]

Techniques and working groups

The children began to initially work on their own ideas, but began to notice, quite quickly what each other were doing. This led to the sharing of practical ideas and skills and the solving of problems of how to make the sticks stand up straight. The clay representation of the new trees within a jungle was extended when Sher began to collect objects from within nursery to add to the clay. A small plastic house and set of gates was found and used to represent the playhouse and gate in the jungle. Initial drawings, maps, and photographs were brought out by the practitioners and displayed within the working environment.

The group used these maps, drawings, and photographs as a point of reference, to help them remember what it was like outside, before the builders came. This marked a significant shift in how the practitioners saw the children’s ongoing work as something that can be kept and used at later stages instead of being sent home at the end of each day, often to be forgotten about and never referred to again.

Revisiting the emotions from the felling of the trees

Often, when the children had created something either individually or as part of a group, the representations they made were carefully deconstructed and taken apart. Scissors were used to cut the twigs into tiny pieces and the children acted out the experiences they saw and felt as the trees were coming down. This made us think that maybe our interpretation of the apparent excitement of the trees coming down and the presence of new men and machines maybe was not so clear after all. Maybe the children did have concerns and this idea of exploring how to make a new jungle became a platform for some of these issues to surface. Aryaan began to cut the trees down using scissors and Zayd followed Aryaan’s lead. Aryaan worked in silence and Zayd gently but repeatedly says “chop, chop, chop” as he cuts.

Sher “Save the jungle...the men are killing the trees, the monkeys will die” Zayd continues to gently chop down the trees together with Aryaan.] Sher “The trees are breaking the house”

The plastic house was used to represent the playhouse outside which the children often congregated within] “The children gonna die.”

Death and Destruction

For Sher, the subject of death arose at different moments, the monkeys died on the rocks; the trees were being killed by the men and the concern that the children in the house might die. This pattern developed over several weeks and I did not notice it until the end of the project. In retrospect, this may have been something to explore with the children, the idea of what death means to the children – a thought provoking and challenging subject for all involved. However, like many projects, there are multiple paths that can be taken and choices are made over others and sometimes, potential choices are missed. This was one such occasion.

Exploring the Properties of Materials

The new room was filling up with new and interesting materials for the children to use within their explorations. With each new encounter with a material, the children needed time and space to explore its properties. When working with soft pastels, their fascination began with its chalky, soft effect and they delighted in covering large surfaces of paper with

single colours, rubbing their hands over it, to smudge it and transfer and transform the colour of their hands. These explorations enabled the children to find the potential of this material, to understand what it can do and make reasoned choices of how to use it to communicate their ideas at a later stage. The explorations lead to surprising visual results that even I as an artist, familiar with such materials had often not thought of.

Dilemmas and Choices

We did not always know what to do but were prepared to take risks, and try things out. One dilemma we faced was whether the children should have free access and choice over all the available materials or should we, as practitioners and artist make choices over the materials, we selected for the children to use. We observed that when the children had access to everything, it was often chaotic and difficult for the children to make informed choices over the materials, as they often just wanted to use everything in sight, just because it was there. When their choices were limited, they often pushed the boundaries of the materials more, exploring the subtle qualities and concentrating on the application of the material to represent their ideas. The choices we made when selecting the range of materials was based upon our observations, notes, and discussion on how we could extend the development and investigation of the children’s skills and ideas. For example, we noticed how the children were more intrigued by the paints ability to mix and transform itself into a different colour and we listened to their conversations regarding certain colours being more for girls than boys. We chose to spend time, working alongside the children, exploring the effects and concept of colour, collecting examples of colour from outside, posing questions of where colour might come from, rather than concentrating on the classification and recognition of colours, their names and what happens when you add white to red. Instead the children lead us into their world of ‘secret colours’, sharing with us their discoveries of leaves which are green on one side and silver on the other – a ‘secret colour’, or the tiny spec of pink on the edge of a daisies white petal. “Secret colours are surprise colours,” said Ayesha.

Our Learning...

In exploring what the jungle was for the children of Adderley, we in turn were able to examine our own professional practice as artist and nursery practitioners. In observing closely the children, recording their explorations we were able to make visible their experiences and learning to a wider audience of adults and children both within the locality of the nursery and through presentations, and publications such as this. The observations and documentation we collected became our evidence to reflect upon to identify what the children were learning and to anticipate and plan our next steps. We thought through every decision we made so that we understood the reasons of why we were offering certain experiences or provocations to the children to explore. We began to re-examine and re-define our roles within the learning of the children and found that our best working relationship was to be alongside the child rather than in front teaching at them or somewhere behind just accepting everything that they do, without challenging or questioning them.

We began to feel comfortable with the choices we made when balancing the exploration of skills with more open-ended experiences of discovery. We realised that by taking risks and not knowing what might happen was often where our most exciting work lay. We recognise, that our research into standing back and observing the children first and then reflecting on what we have seen in order to make better choices and decisions is something that has not been ‘resolved’ throughout this project. Instead, we find ourselves on the beginning of a journey that has many possibilities of pathways that we can reflect upon to follow.

*Article and photographs by Debi Keyte-Hartland, Artist
Photograph on page 6 by Jonathan Lee*