

Music to their ears

A 'Dogs, Bones and Dancing' project at two settings in Cumbria began with children exploring musical instruments, which led to a variety of creative activities, discovers *Annette Rawstrone*

The importance of children using music as a way to express their ideas and interpret and understand the world is at the heart of a two-year project that saw children enthusiastically develop and build on their interests in instruments, dance and performance.

Brantfield Nursery School and St Thomas's C.E. Primary School (see box), both based in Kendal, Cumbria, were involved in the project – which became known as 'Dogs, Bones and Dancing' – led by Sightlines Initiative, an organisation that inspires children to learn through enquiry, expression, imagination and curiosity.

'We felt music was important to explore because musicality is often forgotten as a language of expression. In early years centres and schools, we recognise drawing, language, painting and building as ways of expressing yourself, but music is often reduced to a box of instruments on the top shelf,' explains project author and mentor Robin Duckett.

'We began the project by setting a framework of working where we would all make time to listen and reflect on what was happening – not just adults but the children too.'

Staff at Brantfield Nursery School are influenced by the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, and thought that getting involved in the project and working with musician and project facilitator Catherine Reding would be exciting and good for professional development. Ms Reding visited the nursery school every three weeks but children and staff continued to be inspired by the project between visits.

Ms Reding would bring her charango and accordion when she visited the nursery and often improvised fast

'If children drive and lead what is happening then their learning is much more powerful and motivating'

The instruments made available to the children included an accordion and a cello

and slow music for the children to explore, play or dance to. Children had free access to the nursery's musical instruments, which include shakers, drums, a triangle, glockenspiel and ukulele. They were encouraged to play these both inside and outdoors – where there were also chimes hanging from the trees.

They also enjoyed using a CD player, with favourite CDs being pop music such as One Direction, Katie Perry and Jessie Jay. Staff broadened the range by adding classical music and music from different cultures, such as traditional Indian and Chinese music. Parents and other family members were invited to share their interests in music and dance in the nursery, which led to children hearing bagpipes and cello and watching street dancing, ballet and Zumba, as well as joining in themselves.

A stage was made out of wooden blocks for performances and children used costumes and puppets.

OBSERVATIONS

Staff started by observing the 140 children across the nursery's three classes so that they could focus on what was motivating and interesting them. Retired head teacher Veronica

Broyd says, 'If children drive and lead what is happening then their learning is much more powerful and motivating.' It was noted that many children were inspired by dance and music. They loved to build stages, dress up and dance to pop music. One class was interested in creating performances for others to watch, while another was motivated by their interest in dogs.

It was decided to see how children would respond to a new musical opportunity, so Ms Reding brought two musical instruments into the setting for the children to explore – a charango and piano accordion. While some children carefully picked out notes with their fingers on the charango strings, other strummed it enthusiastically or played it with a friend. One girl thought the accordion keys made 'ballet music' and the bass notes were 'dinosaur music'.

Staff were inspired to make a greater range of musical instruments available to the children at all times. 'Children would choose what instruments they wanted to support their play, drama or performance and take it in turns. Some even started to write their own music and do musical-type annotations,' says Ms Broyd.



Book corner

A selection of great stories featuring dogs

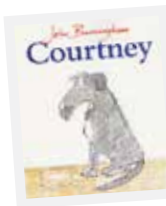
Motor Miles by John Burningham

Little dog Miles is given a home by Alice Trudge and her son Norman but proves to be a very difficult pet. He doesn't like walks, rain, other dogs. In fact, the only thing that he does like is being in a car. Neighbour Mr Huddy reckons the only solution is to get Miles a car of his own and sets about building him one... This picture book is beautifully illustrated, with endearing characters and reassuring messages on themes including friendship.



Courtney by John Burningham

When the children bring Courtney home he's just a loveable scruffy old dog. But he has the most amazing talents. He can cook, he can juggle, he can even play the violin. Then one day the wonder dog packs up his trunk and leaves home, though the children find out his helping paw is not far away. Another classic story by Burningham and one that is slightly unsettling and filled with mystery.



Oi Dog! by Kes and Claire Gray and Jim Field

In this hilarious sequel to *Oi Frog!*, Cat insists that there are rules – only mules sit on stools, no-one but hares should sit on chairs and, however irritating, dogs must sit on frogs. Time to change the rules, says Frog. Will Cat want to sit on gnats instead of cushy mats? Will spiders like sitting on gliders? Will whales be happy to sit on nails? And, most importantly, where is frog going to sit?



Dogs by Emily Gravett

Gorgeous canines of every shape, size and colour bound through this irresistible picture book – a Chihuahua, Dalmatian, and a twist in the tail.



The Detective Dog by Julia Donaldson and Sara Ogilvy

Peter's dog Nell has an amazing sense of smell but it's not her only talent. Every Monday she goes to school with Peter and listens to children read. So who better to have on hand when they arrive one morning to discover that the school's books have all disappeared. Nell is ready to sniff out the culprit!



Black Dog by Levi Pinfold

In this award-winning story, a black dog appears outside the Hope family's home. As each member of the household sees it and hides, the dog grows bigger and bigger. Only Small has the courage to face the dog...

McDuff Moves In by Rosemary Wells and Susan Jeffers

The little dog nobody wanted finds a loving home with Fred and Lucy – and all the sausages and vanilla rice pudding he can eat.



The children turned their performances into storyboards

'Having already explored the instruments, they had worked through the noisy phase and the learning was powerful as children started to shape their ideas.'

Without overbearing direction from adults, children would sometimes designate roles for each other and put on shows.

DANCE AND MUSIC

A CD player and CDs were made available to the children who showed a particular interest in music.

A pivotal moment came when a child listening to traditional Indian music commented, 'I don't want to dance to that because it's not proper music.' When asked what music is, she responded, 'Music is songs.'

So staff began to question how encountering new genres of music and dance would help children to think more broadly. This was when they invited parents and older children to visit and share their music and dancing, which the children increasingly joined in with.

One boy reluctant to participate was helped by the introduction of a 'shadow screen' – simply a white sheet with a light source behind it. It gave him the confidence to explore without being directly seen. Others explored with shadows and music and used puppets.

Children became deeply engaged in music, dance and performance. A group of 12 interested children were taken outside in order to further explore how they would move to different styles of music.

A range of music was played on speakers and Ms Reding also played the accordion for the children to dance to, improvising happy, scary, fast and slow music.

'It was nice to see how they responded outside because they were able to travel more and be more enthusiastic because of the extra space,' says Ms Broyd.

Children adapted their dance to the speed of the music with more arm actions and smaller, slower steps during slow tunes and swinging arms and legs with faster music.

Staff filmed the dancing and edited it into significant moments which were shared with the children and parents. Stills were also taken from the film and children were invited to make a collage of themselves dancing. They wanted to make it look like it was moving and, when reflecting on the artwork, created speech bubbles for themselves.

Children also took photos of each other dancing and created choreographic story boards. They wrote and drew on them and used them to make up further dances together. ➤

STORYTELLING AND PERFORMING

The class were enthused by storytelling and performing. When asked 'what is a show?', children's answers ranged from the performance – acting, music, dancing – to the audience – listening, watching, clapping – to the feelings generated – nervous, funny or scary.

They used pallets and crates to create an outdoor stage on which to develop their performances. During one session, dancing developed into a game of chase with the children running away from a 'cheetah'. Children were enthusiastic to draw a joint picture of what happened to share with the others.

Staff wondered how children would respond to using instruments in a wild garden area. Children investigated the instruments and a theme developed about a snake hiding in the bushes. They used the instruments to explore the sounds of the snake and the following week children used a storyboard format to retell the story and also made little books.

Inspired by their interests, a visit was arranged to the local art centre. 'Children could dance on the stage and be the audience. Experiencing a proper stage and lighting was really exciting for them,' says Ms Broyd. 'We also celebrated their passion and excitement for performing by taking them to see "The Three Little Pigs" ballet. It was brilliant for the children to actually see dance and performance used to retell a traditional story.'

DOGS

A large group of children in the morning class were heavily involved in dog role play so it was decided that this interest would be a good starting point for the children's musical explorations.

Staff came up with questions which they thought could lead to exploration of sound and movement: What sound does your dog make? How does your dog move when it is hungry/tired/excited/frightened/happy? And also asked more general questions about their pets and the kinds of things they do with them – 'Sabre does this: Awooooo! And ra ra ra ra.' Children drew and told stories involving their pets and it was decided to explore stories and drama.

They enjoyed moving like dogs behind a shadow screen while Ms Reding played the accordion. The session was filmed and shown later in

ST THOMAS'S C.E. PRIMARY SCHOOL

A Reception teacher from St Thomas's C.E. Primary School, a feeder school for Brantfield Nursery School in Kendal, Cumbria shadowed the project and in its second year, they joined in. Observation-based planning based on children's interests and ideas was not central to the class practice, so they decided to see how children encounter, think and respond through music, dance and drama, as a natural continuation to the work done in the nursery.

Many children invented their own stories and used music, movement and visual media to explore the characters. Stories included dogs, bones and magic, so it was suggested a group of children come together to create a large-scale drawing of 'The Magic Bone' and write new stories, which they shared with the class.

Over a few months they all worked together to create a film of the story using their



Children worked together on 'The Magic Bone' artwork

own words, pictures, music and movement. As the project progressed, children became more skilled and confident in choosing and using musical instruments. Where the film was up to was shared with the whole class at the start of every session, before proposing which part of the story to explore that day. The finished film was shown to the school and parents at special events.

'I'm very proud of what they created together, and know they are,' says musician and project facilitator Catherine Reding. 'There was a lot of enthusiasm in the work that was taking place. Seeing the children develop through the year in the way they move, listen, think and share their thinking was fantastic. The creativity is wonderful and really showcases what children can do.'



MORE INFORMATION

- www.sightlines-initiative.com
- *Adventuring in Early Childhood Education* by Robin Duckett and Mary Jane Drummond (Sightlines Initiative)
- *The Drama of Sound* DVD (Sightlines Initiative)
- Documenting learning, www.makinglearningvisiblresources.org

the main classroom – one child was so delighted to see her movements on screen that she replicated them.

Staff observations included:

- Music and dance are a powerful vehicle for children to express themselves and don't rely on them being able to talk.
- Being dogs allows the children to become mischievous.
- There was a lot of great listening and responding to sound.
- Some children interacted playfully with the audience.
- Some wanted to tell stories about dogs afterwards.

Over the coming weeks they explored how children use instruments to help tell their own stories. Children used music and movement to add drama to their story.

REFLECTIONS

Through working with Sightlines, Ms Broyd believes staff got a better understanding of the rich learning that comes from really watching children and building on their inter-

ests. It deepened reflection on the children's responses and interactions, and they looked at how they could extend and maintain the project more than before. Ms Reding attributes the impact of the project on the whole nursery being enthusiastically involved.

'The learning during the project was so powerful,' reflects Ms Broyd. 'We learnt that giving children time is the key. Rather than rushing through, we constantly reflected and allowed children to explore, experience, practice and perfect. It also had a big impact on our practice, giving staff the confidence to go with children's interests rather than shoe-horn them into their own topics.'

She was impressed with how the children worked together, developing their social skills, confidence and respect. 'Because children were so excited and motivated, all areas of development were well supported,' she says. 'Shades of literacy and numeracy came through, as well as creativity, musicality and storytelling.' ■