

We've explored... dragons

How a dragon's visit amazed and inspired Reception children in Manchester. By *Annette Rawstrone*

A fire-breathing dragon swooped into the Reception classroom at Richmond Academy in Oldham, Greater Manchester and ignited an even greater interest in the children's fantasy investigations.

The children became curious about the idea of dragons after reading Julia Donaldson's book *Zog*, starring an accident-prone dragon. They found the main character of the book engaging and started to use fantasy figures in the small-world area to retell the story and create their own dragon adventures.

Reception teacher Charlotte Smythe transformed the role-play area into a castle and added enhancements such as regal costumes so that the children could dress up and act out their own stories involving dragons, princesses and knights. They also enjoyed reading other stories about dragons and castles within the fortification.

'The early years team has recently changed our approach so that we follow the children's interest in our planning and the development of the curriculum. We aim to give the children the opportunities to lead the direction of the learning in the class,' explains Ms Smythe. 'We are very flexible in our approach and time is given to allow these interests to develop and flourish. We prioritise first-hand experiences and make learning meaningful in everything that we do.'

The children enjoyed creating their own dragons with plasticine. Ms Smythe introduced them to various depictions of dragons so that they could study their features and model their mythical creatures with wings, long tails and snouts.

A school visit from the Dragon's Mouth Puppet Theatre enabled the children to experience watching a puppet show featuring a dragon that was performed in neon light. They

were then encouraged to make their own neon-light puppets out of corrugated plastic and use them to produce dragon-inspired performances in puppet light booths. 'Putting the puppets under the lights made the bright colours shine and it looked like they had come alive,' Ms Smythe says. 'They looked magical.'

BROUGHT TO LIFE

'As the children were becoming so fascinated with the idea of dragons, I wanted to develop this further and really immerse them into a fantasy world,' says Ms Smythe. 'I did some research online and found out how to really simply create a video which can make it look like a dragon has actually been in our classroom, using a free app called Creatures FX.'

She then laid a trail for the children to follow, starting with an anonymous letter asking the children for their help in finding something that a mysterious visitor had lost in the school. The first clue was to watch a video. 'They were amazed and excited to see a dragon swoop into their classroom, land and blow out fire before flying off again. The video really captured their imaginations. It looked so real,' she recalls.

'All of our children have English as an additional language and seeing the video really stimulated and encouraged lots of quality talk, especially from a child who is an international new arrival. It showed me just how much language he does have when he's inspired to speak. They all discussed the logistics of the dragon entering their classroom and asked probing questions.'

Questions of wonder included: How did the dragon get in? Why is our roof not damaged? Why did the dragon's fire not burn anything? Is that why the weather is so stormy today? Has Zog caused the stormy weather?

One child noticed that 'the door on the video was open; that's how he got



The children study the spots on the 'dragon egg' with magnifying glasses

in', to which another replied, 'He's too big for the window so he had to come in through the door'.

EGGED ON

The children repeatedly watched the video, looking for more clues as to how the dragon got into the classroom. They then read and followed the remaining clues, all of which provoked more talk about where to look and why. The clues led them outside into the very stormy weather, where they found a large egg.

'The children's faces lit up, they were amazed and so excited at what they had found. However, they became very caring and empathetic that the egg wasn't theirs, and for that reason they had to be really careful. They began to express lots of ideas – they had to be gentle so it wouldn't break and quiet enough not to scare what they said was a baby dragon. The children wanted to bring the dragon egg into the classroom away from the storm,' continues Ms Smythe.

The children spent all afternoon

Book corner



Watching the dragon video; discovering the giant egg; and caring for it

looking at the egg – comparing it to smaller chicken eggs and studying the spots on it with a magnifying glass. They also continued exploring the classroom for more clues.

Some thought the dragon was scary and were concerned that it would be angry if they took or broke the egg. They discussed whether it was an angry or friendly dragon. It was decided that it was nice and that they should write letters to the dragon, who they thought was Zog, explaining that they had found the egg and that he should come back to the classroom to collect it.

Towards the end of the day, one little boy said, 'We need food and milk for him', to which another child responded, 'Yes, in case the dragon baby wakes up when we aren't here.' They carefully wrapped the egg in a blanket and put milk, water and fruit next to it.

At home time the parents were invited in to watch the dragon video, which added to the children's excitement.

'Some parents find it difficult to engage as they also have English as an additional language, so it was a great opportunity to show them and discuss what the children had been learning,' says Ms Smythe.

The following day, the dragon egg had disappeared. In its place was a thank you letter from the dragon saying that it would send a photo once the egg had hatched.

Ms Smythe's next challenge is to find a way to do that while the children continue to look for Zog. One girl found words outside that another class was using for a phonic word hunt and presumed that they were messages from Zog, while another put a drawing by the window for Zog to collect.

Children often wonder whether birds or aeroplanes flying overhead are Zog, leading to lots of maths talk about size and perspective.

'The magic is still very much alive in our classroom and the hunt continues,' adds Ms Smythe. ■

Zog by Julia Donaldson

Zog is the keenest dragon in school and also the most accident-prone. Luckily he is helped by a mysterious girl, but will she help him to capture a princess?



Zog and the Flying Doctors by Julia Donaldson

Princess Pearl, aided by Zog and Sir Gadabout, flies around the country tending to a sunburnt mermaid, a distressed unicorn, and even a sneezy lion.

Winnie's Midnight Dragon by Valerie Thomas

What happens when a baby dragon crawls through Winnie and Wilbur's cat flap.



George and the Dragon by Chris Wormell

'Far, far away in the high, high mountains in a deep, deep valley in a dark, dark cave – there lived a mighty dragon.' He was an awesome and frightening creature, but had a deep, dark secret.

East Dragon, West Dragon by Robyn Eversole

Two giant, imposing dragons that live on opposite sides of the world confront their greatest fears – each other.



There's No Such Thing As A Dragon by Jack Kent

When Billy finds a tiny dragon in his bedroom, his mum tells him, 'There's no such thing as a dragon!' This only makes it grow until it's bigger than Billy's house – and that's just the beginning.

CASTLES

Shhh! by Sally Grindley

You're about to enter a giant's castle. Can you get through the book without waking him up?



Castles by Colin Thompson

In this fantastical world there are castles in space, floating castles, castles in the sky and castles made of glass.

Look Inside a Castle by Conrad Mason

Meet lords, ladies, knights and squires and find out how they live, work, fight and relax in their castle home as you lift the flaps.



OTHER RESOURCES

- Download Creatures FX for free, <http://apple.co/2ojzsm0>
- Small World Fantasy Resource Collection, Early Excellence, www.earlyexcellence.com (also see Page 30)
- Dragon's Mouth Puppet Theatre, www.dragonmouth.org