

We've explored... **fire**

A 'monster' sighting at one nursery sparked a project looking at a range of themes. By *Marianne Sargent*

When two-year-old Max from Reflections Nursery & Forest School in Worthing, West Sussex, looked into the outdoor stove and said, 'There's a monster in the fire', a six-month-long story project began, leading to the exploration of a number of interesting themes.

Reflections draws inspiration from the forest schools of Denmark and the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. It runs an outdoor learning programme where five groups of children are taken out into the forest for 44 weeks of the year. It also has an atelier (art studio) and employs two full-time atelieristas (artists) and a pedagogical consultant, and the children regularly engage in long-term project work, usually inspired and led by their own ideas and interests.

Director Martin Pace believes this combination of pedagogical approaches fosters a high level of creativity and imagination.

'While I would say our approach is very similar to Reggio, there is a difference, in as much as Reggio is not particularly renowned for its outdoor work. We've been working with children in the outdoors a lot, which has significantly influenced our practice, particularly the outside environment here in the nursery.

'We've got two gardens and both have a fire pit or stove. Having that connection with the outdoors, having the stove, and then Max noticing the fire and recognising all that power and strangeness that fire brings, has been part of the beginning of this particular story as much as engaging with the children and listening to them.'



A comment by Max (above) led to ideas sharing through stories and art

'STORYING'

The Fire Monster project was born from the children's own narratives and storytelling during their independent investigations and play. Mr Pace describes this as 'storying'.

'There was a focus across the whole nursery on listening to the narrative language of expression,' he explains. 'We weren't telling the children stories; we were just listening to theirs. The children were exploring ideas of safety and danger, family relationships and connections to extraordinary creatures.'

'We noticed the children's interest in Max's idea that there was a monster in the fire, and a small group started to get very excited, noticing how the fire changes and how it comes and goes, what the fire likes to "eat" and doesn't, and so it became this idea of a monster living in the fire stove.'

BUILDING ON THE INTERESTS OF CHILDREN

One of the main ways that the children chose to represent their ideas about the fire monster was through





drawing and painting. Mr Pace explains how the nursery practitioners facilitated this: ‘The children were already using painting and drawing as one of the languages of exploring ideas of big, scary, creatures and powers, and had been drawing monsters, volcanoes and dragons,’ he says.

‘We made chalk and dark paper available by the fire as well as providing opportunities for the children to continue their drawing and painting in the atelier.

‘They did lots of paintings over the several months the work lasted and are still continuing to paint versions of the fire monster now.’

The children’s drawings and paintings evolved over the months to include collage. At one stage, the children even chose to bring sticks in from the outdoor area and create three-dimensional pictures along with red plasticine.

The practitioners also spent a great deal of time sitting by the fire, observing and listening to what the children had to say.

‘As part of our practice, we invited children to continue their explorations from one day to the next,’ says Mr Pace. ‘We were not really drawing ideas from them, just listening and responding to their proposals. The children developed their own ideas about what to feed to the fire, following spontaneous discussions between each other. They tested their hypotheses themselves by adding things to the fire.’

OPPOSING THEMES

During the project the children explored a number of opposing

themes: safety and danger; appearance and disappearance; and knowledge and mystery.

Deb Wilenski, Reflections’ pedagogical consultant, says that the children played with these themes and brought in other stories and ideas to extend their storytelling.

‘They were interested in things that got bigger and bigger and bigger, monsters, volcanoes, exploding things, family-based stories about parents and babies, and babies being in danger. From these sets of stories, two physical worlds began to be built in the atelier.’

Ms Wilenski describes how one little girl made some babies out of blobs of clay and placed them under a table. This was the babies’ world – a safe comfortable place. On top of the table was a monster world full of danger.

‘I introduced a tiny toy baby and it was immediately adopted by the children,’ she says. ‘This little model baby began breaking all the rules. He could go between places. He started exploring the monster world, going into the really dangerous places, the dark places, and linking up all those opposite ideas that they’d been exploring for so long.’

These dangerous adventures imagined by the children prompted practitioners to set up a provocation in the form of a light box covered in red materials. Inspired by the story of the fire monster, two boys used these resources to continue the story of the baby, this time exploring the danger of fire.

Ms Wilenski says that giving the children time and space to explore their story ideas has resulted in some very interesting thinking.

MORE INFORMATION

- *The Fire Monster* is priced £10.99 and available from Reflections Publishing. Email susan@reflectionsnurseries.co.uk or go to www.onreflectionpublishing.co.uk

- For Reflections’ other projects, see, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1096022/enabling-environments-explore-crocodiles and www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1096751/enabling-environments-explore-light

- ‘Let’s explore... fire’, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1144433/enabling-environments-enhanced-provision-explore

- ‘Let’s explore... monsters’, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1097656/enabling-environments-explore-monsters
- Reflections Nursery & Forest School, www.reflectionsnurseries.co.uk

- *The Project Approach: creativity in the early years* by Marianne Sargent, Practical Pre-School Books



‘Amazingly, as time has gone on their thinking has become really subtle, so the fire can be good or it can be bad and it can be anything in between. One little girl has talked about a nice fire, a good fire made by the baby, so the two things really started overlapping.

‘When children are really investigating these big ideas, you know they’re not just oppositions. They’re also really closely related to each other; they can easily swap over. The children want to be both – they want to be the scary thing and they want to be scared as well. They want to explore both sides.’



THE NEXT CHAPTER

Reflections Nursery & Forest School has published a book

inspired by the fire project, called *The Fire Monster: a story for children, by children*. It is the third book Reflections Nursery has published.

The book is composed of a collection of the children’s paintings and drawings, accompanied by the comments the children made throughout the project. The text and pictures are paired so that they create a narrative story.

‘The publishing has been very important for us,’ says Mr Pace. ‘It’s been part of our own learning journey.

‘The Fire Monster has been one of the most exciting things we’ve done because it’s been so directly created by the children, and I think it takes a special sort of listening to capture that.’ ■