

Experiments and Encounters

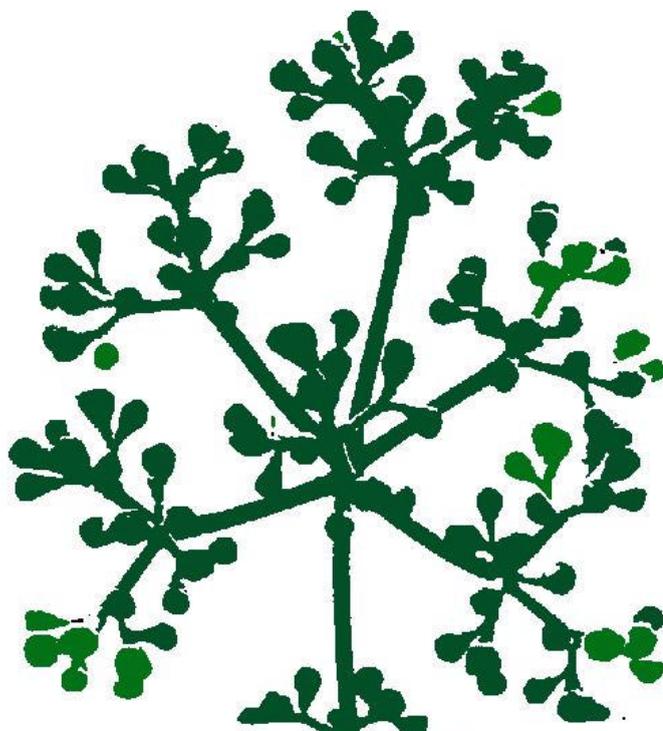
Making Your Mark

Sightlines Initiative with Hadrian Special School

Cath Dennis

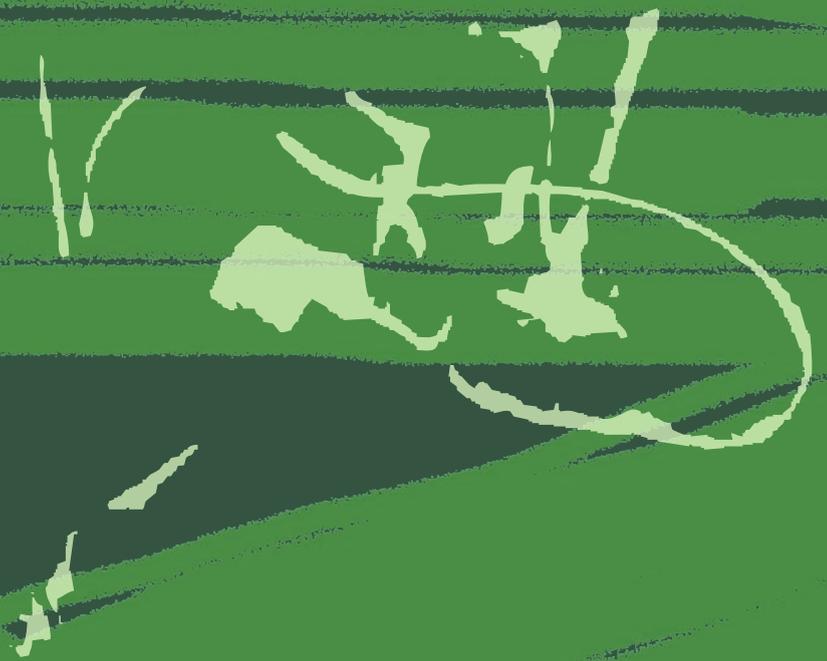
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Hadrian School

Making your Mark



Two children in the nursery class of a school for pupils with severe and complex learning difficulties begin to use tools to make marks intentionally.

The educator's aim is to provide opportunities for the children to explore this interest.

*Questions emerge for the educators.
How can we begin to understand the children's intentions?*

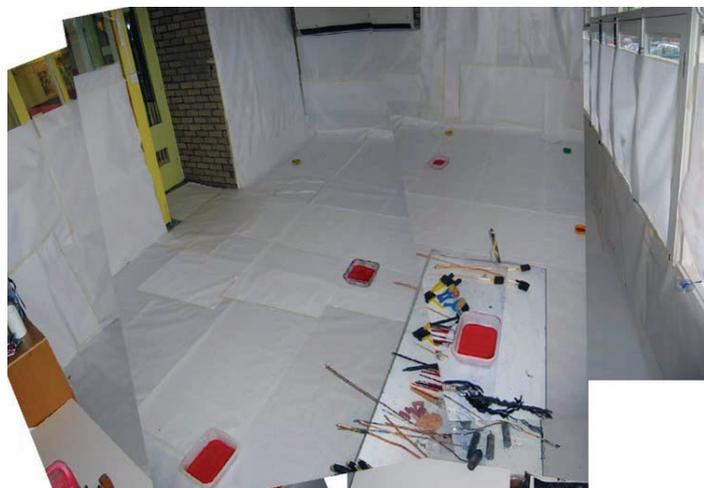
Are they using graphic language to communicate, to represent their feelings and ideas?

Or does this mark-making have a different significance for the children?

A Facilitating and Enabling Space

The educators consider what kind of environment will encourage mark-making and relationships in the group. How can the children be encouraged to explore the properties of the tools and materials in depth? How can the children be encouraged to experiment freely?

The educators create a studio space for the two children who have begun to make marks and also for some of their peer group. Within this Nursery and Year 1 group, the children seldom use spoken language to communicate. Some of the children seem to rarely notice their peers.



The educators decide to offer the children a blank canvas – a white paper-lined room emptied of the usual trappings of the classroom and the expectations associated with it.

The space is intended to offer children room to work alone or in collaboration. Brushes, rollers and mark-making tools are available; some new to the children, some familiar.

Each child is given a small book of blank paper should they wish to work on a smaller scale, or privately.

Initially one colour at a time is introduced to the children to encourage them to explore it closely.

First Responses

The morning group seem surprised by this new environment but select tools and begin to paint immediately. The children seem excited at being in the space and respond in many ways by:

- marking each surface.
- working to cover all the surfaces, like decorators.
- body painting.
- experimenting with different means of applying colour.



The afternoon group, who are less aware of their peers, respond differently, initially seeming uncomfortable. They enjoy having the tools to themselves and:

- repeat similar marks across the whole space trying all tools and materials available.
- explore paint using all their senses
- tear wet, painted paper to reveal the fresh layer beneath.

Are the children using paint and tools to leave their individual stamp on the environment, marking this new space as their own or are they just having fun with the paint?



Over the following sessions the children explore materials and tools further, coming to know the space and beginning to make easy companionable relationships with the educators.

Paper Piling: The Story

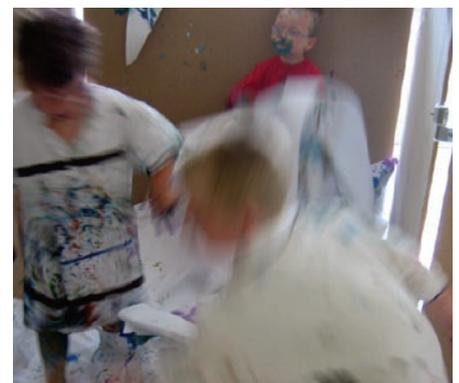
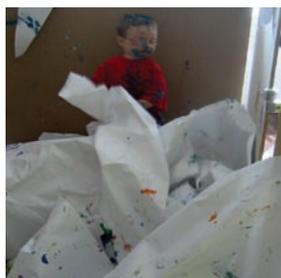
Over five sessions the environment is changed and adapted by the educators in response to the children's use of the space. Painting booths are created within the large space to allow more focused work on a smaller scale.

Lewis, watched by Matthew, who enjoys excitement, tears a piece of paper off the wall and puts it into a painting booth.

Dale looks to an educator, as if to seek permission to join in this activity. Reassured by a smile, he begins to 'deconstruct' the paper-covered walls, adding to the pile in Lewis' booth.



The space at the beginning of the session.



Ali-Can, who enjoys above all, 'having a stick', contributes by whacking the stick on the paper as it is fetched to the booth.



Kate contributes to the deconstruction before drawing on the uncovered painting boards using pastels with great concentration.

Lewis and Matthew receive the paper offerings of the other children, rearranging them in the booth.

Every child in the group joins in until every tiny scrap of paper in the room has been piled into the booth.

The children stand and watch as Lewis lies down on the paper and closes his eyes. Nobody else joins the two in the booth but there are smiles of enjoyment before the group, job done, disperses to do other things.



The educators wonder what this episode reveals about the children and their experiments with mark-making. Perhaps the environment of the project is enabling the children to make their mark differently, in this instance, without using paint and tools. Or could it be that they are more engaged by the tearing and scrumpling activity for its own sake? Whatever the motivation, the episode leads the educators to reflect on new levels of communication and collaboration in the group.



Eve's Dance

Being left in the work space with only two others towards the end of the session opens up new possibilities for Eve, who becomes free in a smaller group. Eve is an experimenter. She uses all of the materials and tools, trying everything out in a very soft, focused way.

When everyone leaves the space, she discovers the floor underneath the paper and starts to reveal more of it. Normally she inclines her head and does not easily make eye contact, but when she clears the space of paper, she stands in the doorway, dances and makes sounds of delight.

What was it that made Eve respond so joyfully? Perhaps the time for quiet un-scripted activity and acceptance from the educators has made the difference?



Beginning to Paint

Many of the children embark on collaborative works with their peer groups and the interested educators. The educators observe growing confidence in using materials, and some children begin to work in a more considered way with paint.



The educators are curious about the significance of these new ways of working. Has the time and space for experimentation with mark-making helped some of the children to develop new skills in representation?

The Beautiful Painting

In the first session Dale picks up the radiator roller; 'I'm working' He tries to cover all of the paper with paint. Perhaps he is imitating decorating done at home? He and Harry 'work' at decorating together.

At the beginning of the fourth session the children are given a full palette of colours to work with. Painting booths have been set up to enable children to have more private space with separate, large vertical sheets of paper to work on.

Dale & Harry begin to paint before being joined by Lewis. With a full range of colours they appear to concentrate on colour & form building a vocabulary of marks.



The educators review the observations of 'The Beautiful Painting'.

Has Dale left the role of 'decorator' behind? Is he making aesthetic judgements about his picture?

The development of his painting skills suggests an intention to make a representation rather than replicate an activity.

But the educators conclude with more questions to investigate.



More Questions

What did children take away from the session? Did the experience strengthen their sense of group identity?

How many ways are there for educators to read a situation?

How close can we get to understanding children's thinking and intentions?

These are the questions that are informing the educators' thinking.