

Seaside Play – The poetics of the beach

Primary English

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Specialist knowledge for teachers

Morecambe Bay's beaches are a wonderful resource for local schools. This project seeks to explore play as fruitful for creative activities in ways that encourage proficiency in writing, oral and artistic skills.

The beach calls to be played with, and it's hard to resist digging, moulding sand castles or writing letters in the sand. If the tide is in, adults and children want to paddle. It is a natural playground (Carruthes and Dakkak, 2000). The project responds to the playfulness of the seaside setting in order to engage with the poetics of the beach and encourage imaginary, verbal and artistic play. These activities—including playing on the beach—encourage a connectivity to nature through sensory exploration in play to draw children's attention to appreciation of their natural world.

Seaside towns get a bad press: they are identified as challenging areas of deprivation and yet they hold some of the richest natural environments. The project connects children to their local beach landscapes, draws their attention to its wonderful features, animals and their natural habitat, as well as to it as a landscape of play.

The project seeks to enable school children to channel natural play tendencies into playing with sand, but also language, materials through collage and drawing, and with their imagination in learning about past seaside activities and imagining the future. Learning about the past of their home also facilitates positive connection to their local area. By visiting the beach and playing at Morecambe children are brought into contact with the animal world both through accidental meetings with crabs or jellyfish on the sands, hearing the cries of seagulls, or through the variety of birdlife artistically reproduced in the Tern Art Project on the Pier and the promenade. This experience of attenuated sensuous response informs their poetic writing as they reflect on objects found, animals and plants encountered and playing with and on the sands. The tactile and visual elements can be reproduced in the school through

collage, enabling reflection on the activities and experiences.

Recent research on 'sensory landscapes' has underlined the importance of encouraging a rich understanding of landscape in order to fully value it. Playing is a hugely inclusive activity, bypassing scholarly achievement as well as a range of disabilities or confidences. The multisensory experience of landscape available at the seaside, a focus on the tastes, sounds, smells, sights, and textures of the landscape (and that can emerge through play, poetry writing and collaging) can embrace 'diverse experiences' as well as 'resonate' among children with 'varied sensory, social and cultural backgrounds' (Bell et al, 2022).

Research on play demonstrates that play is vital for many key skills. Play is a factor in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child for good reason. Playing makes the connections in the brain stronger (making it work better) as well as making you better at problem solving. Play is also vital for the imagination: as children are invited to consider the seaside play in the past, playing can open up their capacity to problem solve and imagine positive futures. Philosophers writing about play emphasize that it is a privileged and active human capacity: conceptual playfulness can help modulate feelings and intellect as well as enable innovation and the undermining of negative constraints or prejudices. Playing enables a focus on process rather than product – it frees us from the constraints of performance while, ironically, enabling the confidence and interconnection to make performing possible.

Play is intimately connected to the creative arts. The word 'poetry' comes from the latin, poesis, which means making. When we write poetry we are making new connections, new worlds and new perspectives—we are playing. The grammatical orthographical and syntactic rules children learn through the curriculum are the building blocks; play is the cement.



Key knowledge and concepts

- Play as vital for thriving, creativity and problem solving.
- Playing at the seaside as a catalyst for connection to and appreciation of nature and the animal world.
- Creative arts as a form of play that encourages the imagination and reflection on experiences.

The resource emphasises the part that play has in children's creativity and environmental appreciation.

To make full use of the resources, teachers need only familiarise themselves with the aims outlined here, a poem by E. E. Cummings, 'maggie and milly and molly and may', and with the seaside play past objects and contextual information (there are plans to make these objects available from Lancaster Maritime Museum in their handling collection).

The project also allows teachers to be open to the educational capacity of play to build confidence and enable a love of poetry and art that can support structured curriculum learning demands in English (and other subjects). Tasks are introduced—such as erasure poetry and rewriting—that can be expanded to other poems and landscapes if desired.

Examples in practice

The resource mixes in-class activities and a day trip to the beach. The trip to the beach requires contingency planning: while most children are happy to play on a beach even in the rain, the writing activities that are best done on site require covered areas for the poetry activity and worksheets if the weather is wet. Introducing the children to past seaside play objects and activities before visiting and following up with rap-writing and collage activities enables time for reflection and embedding of their learning experiences, channelling play into deeper learning.

Setting up the beach experience

The importance of play

Introducing key ideas about play can be done through a true and false activity.

- Is it T or F that play makes your brain stronger (by building connections)? (T)
- Is it true that play is a right and is in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ('lots of grown-ups across the world deciding what children should have')? (T)
- Is it true that [teacher's name] won a sand-castle-building competition? (F?)
- Is it T or F that play isn't serious? (F – we can play instruments, sports: play can be very serious!)
- Is it T or F that play makes you better at problem solving? (T)

Seaside Objects from the Past

The Museum's seaside objects can be introduced with the accompanying materials on moodle, which are configured as an explorer's kit for the children to work out what the object is. The kit online includes a picture of the object and an 'evidence file' with contextual information and 'investigation' sheets asking the children to guess what the objects are. The sound files have short (2-minute) dramas depicting the object in situ.

When we visited the school, we presented two of the objects to the whole class, asked questions about what they thought it was, and played the dramas. In smaller groups we introduced individual objects and then did a specific creative activity: the penny lick group presented a drama (script on moodle); the sand moulds group wrote about sand castle adventures through a formatted pass-the-paper activity (full explanation on moodle); and the swimming costume and Punch and Judy puppets inspired drawing and collage. For the collages we included copies of photographs from Lancaster Maritime Museum Morecambe Publicity Archive.



Poetry writing preparation

In the classroom setting, introduce the E. E. Cummings poem, 'maggie and milly and molly and may'. Here you can ask questions about its format and what's going on in the poem. Ask the pupils:

- Can you identify any rhymes? Any half-rhymes (words that sort-of but don't quite rhyme).
- Any words the children don't know? Languid? stranded?
- Why does the poet choose to call something a 'horrible thing' rather than give it a name? Do they like having to guess what it is?
- What are the five senses and which ones can we find in the poem? (Sight, touch, and sound.) Draw children's attention to the senses being used in the poem. In the poem, Maggie hears a shell that sang; Molly is chased and May touches a smooth round stone.
- What does the last line mean? What does it mean to find yourself or lose yourself?
- Talk about why Cummings may have left out the capital letters: Cummings knew Latin and Greek – so it's not that he didn't know his orthography!

Optional: Follow the worksheet on nonsense poetry that involves reading and getting to grips with 'The Jabberwocky', writing a short boring story about meeting a monster on the beach; making up their own nonsense words; and finally writing a nonsense Beach poem.

Afternoon at the beach: Morecambe

Suggested Itinerary

Arrival at the Clock Tower and walk down to the Mallows Bay beach directly below: the children have to... play! Leave them for at least 20 minutes as they start to relax and find sticks, crabs, seashells, and start to write, build and explore. Remind the children of the five senses and ask them to think about what they hear, smell, touch and feel as well as what they can see. It won't be long before the beach setting means they are prodding, digging, running, smelling, and running hands and even toes through the sand. Children on one of our visits started full-body rolls across the sand.

- After 20 mins give them a task: learn the name for one new thing or find something unusual.

Stay on the sand if it's sunny; walk to the Platform awning and give out clipboards if too wet or windy. Writing exercise: First, for five minutes write out a couplet on something unusual you found and what you felt or thought, copying the Cummings poem. Then for another five minutes join up with 3 others and write out the whole poem. Read them out in turn.

- Have lunch on the beach or the pier or under the awning (!) – continue to chat and play.
- Fill in the pier worksheet on the animal sculptures and animals on the beach.
- Walk towards the Battery playground for a final play and pick-up.

Curriculum aims and objectives

The aim of this unit is to integrate play into learning and to appreciate the beach as a site of play, to connect with their local area and appreciate the natural environment.

It contributes to the KS2 National Curriculum in 'the development of pupils' confidence and competence in spoken language and listening skills'. Some of the tasks introduce poems, expanding their knowledge. The drama enables 'Role-play and other drama techniques' to help pupils 'identify with and explore characters', in this instance, characters from the past.

The focus on play should allow repetition of learnt skills, and contribute to developing 'positive attitudes towards and stamina for writing' through writing poetry and raps, as well as help 'develop positive attitudes to reading and understanding what they read'.

The tasks involve writing and performing poems out loud, 'showing understanding through intonation, tone, volume and action'. Some tasks enable the identification of different forms of poetry (nonsense poetry, the couplet, and free verse).

Writing individual couplets per pupil and then combining the couplets into a longer poem enables planning and the process of drafting and writing. Reading the couplets out enables the rehearsing of sentences orally.

By performing their poems, they achieve the performance of 'their own composition, using appropriate intonation, volume, and movement so that meaning is clear.'

Teachers can adapt materials to draw attention to specific grammatical forms, such as relative clauses (who, which, where, when, whose, that), imitating Cummings's use, for example, 'which raced sideways' or 'whose rays five languid fingers were'. ('maggie and milly and molly and may')

Head

The beach visit and accompanying tasks will give them knowledge of Morecambe's past, of the animal world and the importance of play.

Heart

The visit and tasks will enable an appreciation of their family's or area's past, create connection with the natural environment and specific qualities of the beach and its animals, encouraging care for their environment.

Hands

Children will expand their confidence with and experience of writing and understanding poetry and in creating collage artworks.

Follow-up Session

After visiting the beach, the children can use the worksheets to write 'animal raps' (consolidating poetry writing confidence and rhyming skills). There are also slides on moodle about thinking about the future beach and beach types (wild, smart, preserved or tourist) and letters from animals (crab, seagull and jellyfish) to enable understanding of an animal perspective on the beach.

These activities enable reflection on how to care for the environment and balance human and ecological needs. There are guides for creating effective collages that enable the pupils to reflect on past activities and what they might want to save or revive from the past; ecological interests and animal welfare; and scientific and imaginative possibilities for what they want their future beach to be like.

Suggestion: When we went into the school we took a microphone and amp: the children were excited to read out and any quiet readers were well-amplified to enable full-class engagement.

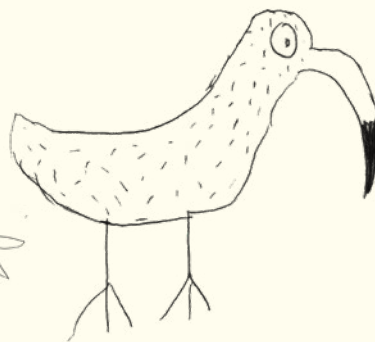
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