

White on White

Tactile and visual perceptions

From a very young age children demonstrate their fascination with the search for the essence of things. We are tuned into this exploration by embracing heuristic play ideas (play with objects) in our environment. However, while we are aware of children's daily encounters with objects, we recognised there was scope to develop children's thinking and language around the constituent materials of things.

Inspired by Alberto Burri's work with the children of Reggio Emilia, we sought to foster a way of 'looking' that makes everyday things special. We wanted to encourage children to explore with all their senses to create a relationship with the world around them. In particular we wanted to provoke a perceptual competence that enabled children to grasp variations in shade of white materials.

Fabric, paper and plastic materials in shades of white were chosen for their variations in texture, weight, size, bulk, consistency, transparency and elasticity. Children were invited to examine materials to discover their tactile qualities. Teachers introduced descriptive vocabulary such as smooth, rough, flat, satiny, puckered, wrinkled.

Children constructed a white walk from the materials. As they traversed the pathway their bodies moved in a sort of dance-exploration as the different tactile perceptions were 'listened to' by feet that were sensitive and intelligent.





A white sheet laid out on the carpet was a simple provocation for children to compose and arrange. William studied Alberto Burri's book and can make links between the materials used in the pictures and what he could see available in our containers. "Where's our ribbon?" he asked

Previously when walking on the pathway, children would walk across the lines of materials. Here, Andrew and Ayva try something different - walking up and down each row.





Teachers were surprised to find children did not have a wide vocabulary to describe the materials they were exploring.

We collected a feely bag of items as a fun way to facilitate conversation about what materials are composed of and how they look, feel and sound.



On reflection, we wondered if we needed to give children more time to absorb the sensations and processes they were experiencing before expecting them to be able to verbalise thoughts, feelings and ideas.

After some modelling, questioning, and coaching, children tentatively started describing how materials felt and were able to make distinctions between the textures of different items.



Pathways

Composition

Language



Aimee said "It makes me laugh" as she stepped on the netting.



Teachers were intrigued to note which materials children used most often in their compositions. Shells, lids, fabric and smaller natural items were more popular than paper. Perhaps children were more comfortable expressing themselves with materials familiar to them.





Children and teachers had some discussion about making a quilt. The computer was used to find an example. Aimee and Olivia embraced the idea of a single layer which had slightly overlapping pieces of material, with no gaps. Olivia cleverly folded material into the spaces, but found some fabrics wouldn't stay quite how she intended.





Shades of white paint were introduced to complement the containers of white materials set up adjacent to the art area.

The group generally tended to envelop the page with paint (in line with their predominant schema), although the starting action and direction varied.



Kayla systematically went from bottom to top. Riley progressed from the middle in an up and down, backwards and forwards movement. Daniel was content to dab.



Sumptuously thick, yet fragile tissues were offered as a different media for children to explore, manipulate and arrange.

Sienna and Danielle followed their schema of enclosing by folding with particular care.



Andrew likes to find out how things work, so he was quick to separate the layers and examine the ripped edges.



White on White
Part two
Taking a closer look ...

We were so impressed with the level of intent children brought to their creations using smaller scale materials. There was a sense of excitement about delving through special 'treasure' and arranging them on the white tiles.





We encountered unexpected difficulties in the last phase of this project when we introduced glue to conserve children's arrangements. After all the opportunities children had to practice arranging outstanding compositions without glue we presumed they would easily replicate this when the adhesive was introduced. No such luck!

Children were distracted by the glue as a media in its own right so that arranging the materials was not as thoughtful as previously. Also we found ordinary PVA unsatisfactory for holding the materials in place. The gluegun produced haphazard, stringy pictures. The final solution was using sticky contact paper as an overlay to transfer the arrangements children had completed on the tile.





As a variant on the themes, we introduced black backgrounds to the setup. Children seem drawn to this contrast of colour which really showed up characteristics such as how shiny, how transparent, and how thick the white materials were.

