

The dancing cats

It all began when some children began to take on the role of cats in the family play area. We decided to hire the video of the musical *Cats*¹⁹ and see if there was any interest in this, especially after the children's interest in ballet earlier in the term.

We hadn't really expected that many of the children would watch the video, or that they would watch it for any length of time, so we were amazed when we put it on and not only did a large group appear in front of the screen, but they stayed there for the next half an hour. Some of the children danced to the music. At mat-time we asked the children about what they had observed on the video and most of the children took a turn at getting up in front of the group to demonstrate a movement or dance step that they had seen.



Watching the video on the Friday.

That was on the Friday and on the Monday the first thing they asked for after mat-time was the "cat" video. Over the next week they continued to ask for the video each day, and as well as watching it intently they began to imitate the dance steps and movements of the dancers – often watching, trying, watching again, and trying again over a long period of time. We also purchased cat masks to add to the area. The children loved these and when demand outstripped supply they practised their skills at asking for a turn and waiting for a turn.



Samantha demonstrating how cats dance on their toes.



Sydney, Holly and Katie dancing to the music while the video is playing.

We videoed the children each day and put our clips on the computer. We ended up with lots of footage and even after severe editing, there was still lots of great dancing to see. The children loved watching themselves on the computer and, as well as watching it with their friends and discussing what they had been doing, they also shared it with their families at the beginning of the session. We played it one afternoon as the afternoon children also enjoyed watching the clips of the morning children dancing.



Holly and Bethaney examining the dancing.



William and Gabby in the afternoon watching the morning children dance.

As the days went by we were often calling out to each other to come and see what the children were doing now. Their dances and movements became more and more like those on the video. We began to notice they had definite favourite songs that they liked to dance to! “Jellicle Cats” and “Magical Mister Mistoffelees” were especially popular.



Bethaney, Holly and Abby developing the steps and movements.



Abby imitating the Rum Tum Tigger.

On the following Friday I got the face paints out and painted cat faces on the children’s faces. Most of the children had their face painted and a whole new range of cat movements developed with some new participants joining in.

A new breed of cats emerge - Jack, Sydnie, and Cathy show off their new faces.



Meanwhile the children continued to take control of the direction their interest took. They included props in their dance sessions, showed each other different steps, pointed out interesting and favourite pieces on the video to each other, and requested activities related to their interest. Jayden came to kindergarten with a mask his dad had made him at home and this led to mask making at the art area. Kim suggested making tails.

Abby and Cathy use scarves and sticks to define the patterns of their dance movements.

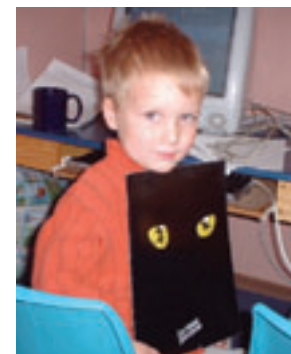
Other children also brought along props from home. Abby and Sydnie brought along cat ears and Jemima brought a cat headpiece and tail. We were also really pleased to borrow a souvenir programme of the show *Cats*, from Liam’s family. Earlier on we had downloaded pictures from the Internet for the children to base their drawings on.



Jemima in her dress-ups.



Jayden with his mask and tail.



Liam with the souvenir programme.

One of the best parts of this work has been the parents coming in and telling us about the conversations taking place at home – Jemima calling the cats at the door the “Jellicle cats”, Abby getting up in the mornings singing the songs from the video, and Jack watching the video at home and telling his mother the names of the cats and what was about to happen next in the story. I had assumed that the children were only watching the dancing and listening to the songs so I was amazed at how much of the storyline they had also picked up. The whole thing has taught me not to underestimate these incredible cat children.

Our investigation into the musical

Watching the video.



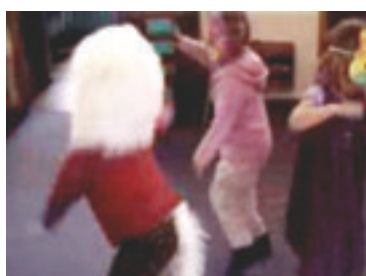
Developing our techniques.



Improving our techniques through observation and practice.



Demonstrating our interpretation.



To be an explorer

This story shows the development of the ability to

- **Make sense of the world** – The children are developing their understanding of the ways drama can represent the people and things around us. They are using dance and movement to represent their ideas.
- **Make links with previous experiences** – The children have been using their previous knowledge of ballet – some of the children attend ballet lessons and earlier in the year they were involved in teaching their friends the steps.
- **Learn useful and appropriate ways to find out what they want to know** – The children have used observation skills to watch the dance steps and movements on the video and to re-create them. They have been involved in using the Internet and the souvenir programme for reference purposes.
- **Actively learn with others as well as individually** – The children have worked individually, in pairs and in groups to dance, to make resources and to watch the show.



Watching and re-creating the steps.



Working with others.

What's happening here?

This is an example of an experience, the introduction of a video, making a significant difference to the depth of children's learning about dance and drama as well as about music and participation. The children develop an interest in cats, and the teachers decide to show the children the video of the musical *Cats* to build on this interest.

What aspects of noticing, recognising, and responding to learning in the arts does this assessment exemplify?

In this exemplar, the teachers notice the children's interest in ballet and in cats. Recognising opportunities to develop these topics, they respond by introducing a video to extend the children's interests. They then sustain these interests by recognising and responding to opportunities for the children to participate in arts activities. The children make masks, develop costumes, and record and watch videos of themselves dancing.

What does this assessment tell us about learning in the arts (using a *Te Whāriki* lens)?

The children's engagement in this project results in the strengthening of the learning community. The motivation provided by the teachers enables the children to increase the depth of their learning and participation in dance. The children then begin to take greater responsibility for the creative side of their dancing. They teach each other new steps, and their families contribute resources and ideas. The children are making sense of the world by developing their understanding of the techniques of dance and drama and how these languages can represent the people around them. They also explore similarities in the behaviour of cats and humans.

How does this assessment exemplify developing competence in the arts?

The children in this exemplar are exploring movement through the elements of dance, including body awareness, energy, space, time, and relationships. As they watch the video, they share their dance interpretations with other children. They watch themselves dancing and respond to their own dancing and to the dancing of others – particularly to the dancers they watch so attentively on the video of the musical. These children are learning that through dance, they can communicate, interpret ideas, and share feelings.