



Lincoln Nursery School children exploring the Sculpture Park.

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What does the imagination look like?

or, How a Museum and a Preschool Made the Invisible Visible

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“Alone
we can do
so little;
together
we can do
so much.”

–Helen Keller¹

In 2014–15, educators from deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum and faculty from the museum’s on-site partner, Lincoln Nursery School (LNS), collaborated on a unique exhibition that investigated the power of the imagination. DeCordova, a 30-acre sculpture park and contemporary art museum with an annual visitation of 85,000, is situated in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb (fig. 1). The museum specializes in exhibiting sculpture and related art forms and creating connections between art and nature. Located on the grounds of deCordova, LNS is a

cooperative preschool inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy.² Sixty students from 14 surrounding towns learn in its four studio/classrooms. Documenting the children’s words and work is a pillar of the Reggio Emilia educational approach, and making this work visible was a main goal of our collaborative exhibition, *What does the imagination look like?*

We mounted the exhibition in “The Square,” a 1,100-square-foot participatory learning space located in a prominent gallery, which we use to present projects

in collaboration with area schools, cultural organizations, and artists. These participatory exhibitions offer an interpretive lens on deCordova’s art, artists, environment, and approaches to education. The name derives from the Italian *piazza*, or town square, which the preschools in the city of Reggio Emilia consider a physical and metaphorical place of public expression and community.

As part of being on the deCordova grounds, LNS children and teachers regularly use the campus and surrounding conservation land as their classroom (intro image). Throughout the year, students observe and respond to changing installations of sculpture, the work of staff and visiting artists, and the flow of museum visitors and the seasons. The children’s voices have come to inform deCordova’s interpretive installations and programs with a creative and collaborative spirit—an approach focused on discovery through experience rather than delivery

2 The Reggio Emilia approach is rooted in the progressive early childhood education pedagogy founded in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in which children are seen as capable citizens with important contributions to make. Particular emphasis is placed on collaborative learning, emergent curriculum driven by the children’s curiosity and inquiry, parent involvement, learning through materials, and a focus on art and nature. Children are seen as embodying “one hundred languages” with which they communicate their thoughts and ideas. Lincoln Nursery School adopted a pedagogy inspired by this approach because of its deep respect for children and their strong commitment to play-based learning. The focus on art and nature made LNS a perfect partner for deCordova; our relationship began in the 2010–2011 school year.



fig. 1.
deCordova
Sculpture Park
and Museum.

1 Helen Keller (1880–1968) was an American author and political activist, and was the first deaf-blind person to earn a bachelor’s degree (from Radcliffe College). This quote is attributed to Helen Keller and comes from her short-lived vaudeville act as part of a circuit speech she gave multiple times in the early 1920s. Joseph P. Lash, *Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1980), 489.

Among our shared concerns was how to present the children’s profound thinking and work in a way that would guide visitors to see it not as “cute” but as “art and ideas.”

of information. Although we had created smaller public displays during the five-year partnership between our two institutions, this would be our first large-scale exhibition for the museum’s visitors. Together, we decided to explore the imagination through children’s inquiry, negotiations, and transformation of materials. The result was a robust, interactive exhibition of the children’s explorations of map-making, bridge building, the nature of holes, and making sounds visible.

Before the exhibition was conceived, LNS had chosen imagination as their year-long umbrella topic; it drove the teachers’ reflections over the course of the school year. The subject is a timely one. A slew of recent studies have documented the decline of creativity and imagination in both schools and the workplace.³ Employers repeatedly cite creativity and imagination as among the most important qualities in their employees,⁴ and yet these skills are not unilaterally developed in schools.⁵ Too much screen time, overburdened schedules, a focus on academic testing, and an emphasis

on right answers has shifted the focus of education in a decidedly unimaginative way.⁶ Because of the importance of this topic for LNS and the public, an exhibition allowed us to demonstrate the importance of creative thinking to a wider audience. We also wanted to design the exhibition to illustrate the importance of childhood, encourage play, and stimulate the imagination of visitors of *all* ages.

Creating a Strategy: Teamwork and Challenges

The first task for the deCordova/Lincoln Nursery School collaborative team (comprised of four deCordova educators and nine LNS faculty) was to come together and define attributes of the imagination that we thought could be made visible to deCordova’s public (which was not an easy task). Together, we asked such questions as: What does the imagination look like? How can/do we support imagination? How can we document imagination?

From our discussions around these questions, we identified three overarching concepts that characterized the ways that LNS students—who range in age from two years, nine months to five years old—experienced imagination: working collaboratively through sharing perspectives; exploring ideas

through transforming materials; and problem solving through inquiry. DeCordova educators then had to devise ways to exhibit these concepts in a family-friendly, accessible way.

Through a series of meetings, the collaborative team identified an extended project explored by each of the four studio/classrooms: mapping as a tool for finding one’s place in the world; the engineering behind bridge building; the nature of holes; and making sounds visible. Each of these extensive investigations developed through LNS’s emergent curriculum approach, which is guided by the children’s line of inquiry rather than a fixed plan of study.

As we developed the project, both of our organizations faced challenges. Being new to creating museum exhibitions, the LNS faculty found it difficult to isolate a single topic from a layered and expansive teaching philosophy. Museum staff was challenged by the large number of collaborators involved in the process and LNS’s unwavering commitment to capture the children’s authentic voice and work. We navigated our collaboration through bimonthly team meetings, intense discussions, small group writing exercises, self-reflection, and presentations that allowed the most poignant classroom topics and exhibition ideas to rise to the surface. The next challenge was how to present them.

3 John Dragoon, “What is Creativity’s Value—In Marketing? In Business?” *Forbes*, October 4, 2010, <http://www.forbes.com/2010/10/04/facebook-zuckerberg-twitter-wendy-kopp-creativity-advertising-cmo-network.html>.

4 IBM, *Redefining Competition: The CEO Point of View* (Somers, NY: IBM, 2016), <http://www-935.ibm.com/services/c-suite/study/studies/ceo-study/>.

5 Claire Cain Miller, “Why What You Learned in Preschool is Crucial at Work,” *New York Times*, October 16, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/upshot/how-the-modern-workplace-has-become-more-like-preschool.html>.

6 Erika Christakis, *The Importance of Being Little: What Preschoolers Really Need from Grownups* (New York: Viking Press, 2016).

fig. 3.

A glimpse inside the pre-kindergarteners' Studio Red.



- Mateo, age 4: “We can make things out of our imagination, right? Well, the imagination is inside of you. It wants you to make something out of, out of...” Jonah, age 5, finishing Mateo’s thought: “nothing.”

Giving Physical Form to Imagination

We then faced the challenge of translating fleeting moments between the students and their teachers into a physical exhibition in The Square—one that would reflect the feelings and intentions of the classroom environments. These spirited studio/classrooms are filled with engaging materials (from blocks to paints to string), inspiring resources (such as books, plants, and bones), and displayed documentation of children’s actions, words, and work that reflects the processes of their thinking (fig. 3).

The Square is a large, neutral gallery space, amply lit by track lighting and streams of sunlight

that pour through its three tall windows. To approximate the warmth and spirit of Lincoln Nursery School classrooms, we made liberal use of rugs, fabric, natural wood furniture, and bold green paint. All items—images of children collaborating, quotes representing the children’s voices and ideas, natural building materials, uplifting musical selections—were carefully chosen to create a comfortable and inspiring environment for visitors of all ages to play, explore, relax, read, and experience the essence of the LNS studios.

Because of The Square’s mission and central location on the deCordova campus, it was important that our exhibition also be designed for a wide variety of interests and learning styles and for short-term and longer-term engagement. Open-ended materials with limitless possibilities for creating (such as wooden blocks) were a must; we also wanted to include a variety of participatory opportunities—playing, building, writing, drawing, listening, reading, and more.

fig. 4.

The nature of holes, from Studio Blue.



The progressive pedagogy and collaborative spirit of both institutions make us powerful allies, open to creative risk-taking and boundary pushing.

As with any project involving collaboration on this scale, managing expectations and conflicting opinions was paramount to success. While our goals were unified, the specific means by which we translated ideas and events from the studios into more general content for museum visitors was a delicate task. There was a concern that even the dynamic installation we had planned would cause the work, and by extension the children, to become clichéd. After much dialogue, negotiation, and some difficult conversations, we agreed upon an installation plan that respectfully depicted the time, thought, and intention behind each story and child, organizing the exhibition around the concepts and related ideas from each of the four studio/classrooms.

Studio Blue: The nature of holes. Studio Blue, the youngest LNS classroom, explored holes throughout the school year, searching for them inside their studio and outside in the Sculpture Park. To reflect their investigations, we constructed a large, open-framed structure pierced with a variety of holes. This included a four-foot-diameter, industrial-strength cardboard tube; a hula hoop; and PVC pipes and fittings, which visitors could peer through, build upon, and turn into angled tunnels and runs for small woolen balls (fig. 4). This simple activity became the most popular part of the exhibition, for adults and children alike.

Studio Yellow: Making sounds visible. The three- and four-year olds of Studio Yellow spent the winter making sound visible. They built instruments out of recycled materials, listened to music, created responsive drawings, formed an orchestra, and played their own score (fig. 5). For the exhibit, we engineered a listening station with drumming, strumming, and shaking music. Visitors were prompted to draw the sounds they heard and then use these symbolic representations to create and perform a music score with homemade instruments modeled after the children's.

Studio Purple: Map-making. The four- and five-year olds of Studio Purple investigated map-making, drawing upon children's innate desire to locate their place in the world. Here, the exhibit featured maps of all kinds, made throughout the year by the students. They were pinned to the walls so that visitors could follow the students' journeys into the Sculpture Park, to and from school, and around their studio (fig. 6). Visitors were invited to make a memory map of their own route from home to deCordova, and to use a child's map to find the beloved "Secret Tree," a weeping

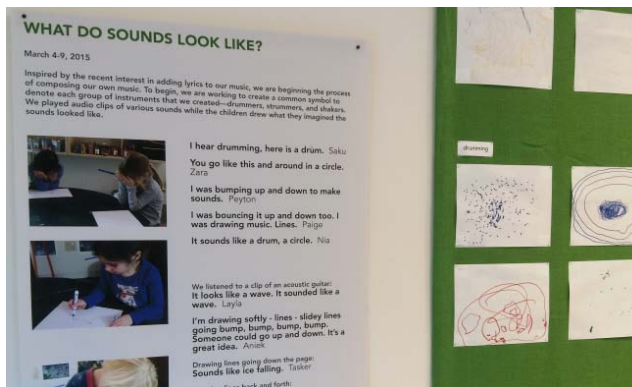


fig. 5. Making sounds visible, from Studio Yellow.



fig. 6. The map-making activity from Studio Purple.

fig. 7.

The bridge-building activity from Studio Red.



beech whose draping branches create a secret hideaway in the Park.

Studio Red: Bridge building.

Finally, the pre-kindergarteners of Studio Red examined bridges from winter through spring, an inquiry that stemmed from a larger conversation about cities that began in the beginning of the school year. Students explored bridge building in a variety of media—blocks, clay, pencil, and paint—demonstrating both their individual and group thinking about engineering and community. In the exhibit, family groups could often be found using the simple blocks and strings provided to build complex bridges that spanned two platforms with a “river” in between (fig. 7).

In addition to the four studio areas, we included a sitting area that featured thematically and pedagogically related books. This provided children, parents, and educators the opportunity to delve deeper into the ideas cultivated by LNS and deCordova.

What does the imagination look like? was on view from July through November of 2015—by far deCordova’s busiest months as an indoor/outdoor institution. Even given its location in what is arguably our most-visited gallery, we were unprepared for the overwhelmingly positive response from the estimated 13,000 visitors who came through the space. Parents, adults, children, teens, and educators of all kinds were

captivated by the children’s work and words, often for extended periods of dwell time. Families from the general public came back repeatedly over the summer and fall and found a comfortable home in the gallery space. The open-ended materials and prompts fostered intergenerational collaboration and invention. Perhaps most tellingly, despite the fact that the exhibition was unmonitored and that many of exhibit elements were not-so-indestructible, the exhibition required very few repairs over the course of the summer; visitors treated it with the same respect and care with which we had presented the children’s work.

In the end, the exhibition served as a gathering space, a place for parents and caregivers to interact with their children, a marketing tool for LNS and deCordova, and inspiration for our visitors to play and exercise their own imaginative muscle. Importantly, the exhibition also served as a launch pad for unique professional development opportunities for classroom teachers, graduate students, and museum educators, all looking for ways to infuse their respective environments and teaching methods with an imaginative spirit. In a world filled with technology, screens, predetermined outcomes, and structured time, we provided an antidote for which our visitors and peers clearly had a thirst.

The partnership between Lincoln Nursery School and deCordova

is an experiment in the future of museums and education. The progressive pedagogy and collaborative spirit of both institutions make us powerful allies, open to creative risk-taking and boundary pushing. As individuals and as educators working toward a common goal, we emerged from this process of making the invisible visible with a stronger exhibition than either of us could have created individually. Collaboration has the potential to create meaningful experiences through relationship building and enriching meetings of the minds, but it also comes with necessary challenges and conflict. It is through this process, however, that we can grow as collaborators and as colleagues, if we are truly open. In our second exhibition with LNS (*Children as Scientists in a Natural World*, summer/fall 2016),⁷ we hope that our visitors will continue to reap the benefits of our primary goal: to encourage play and imagination in people of all ages through the inspiring work of some of our youngest citizens. ■

⁷ deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, *The Square*, <http://www.decordova.org/square>.

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