

Listening to children: fact and fiction in the Spinney woods

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First published in Early Years Educator Magazine, 2016

Kelvin, age five, is in the tiny patch of woodland that sits on the border of his primary school. He is crouching close to the ground watching a worm move slowly over a muddy path. He turns to me and says: *'It's a snake. When will it be a snake?'*

This happened eighteen months ago and I am still thinking about it. Nine words, one boy, one worm; how complex can a moment like this be? Well, here are just some of the questions Kelvin's words continue to raise for me as I work with children, language and the practice of listening:

- When children make definite statements, are they sometimes asking questions?
- When children ask someone else a question are they really asking themselves?
- Where do they want the answer to come from?
- How justified is the distinction we make as adults between fact and fiction?
- How should I as an adult and an educator respond to Kelvin?
- When *will* the worm be a snake?

When we say that we listen to children we might mean that we make time for children's ideas, reflect on their words and actions, talk less ourselves in order to hear children's voices more clearly, find ways to hear quiet children. All of this is important. But really to hear children's voices I believe we need to do something else too.

We have to be prepared to find complexity in the simplest of statements, to question *what language is and what it does* and throw out some of our easy distinctions – between fact and fiction for example. We need to recognise that what children say or write, how they use language, can make us think differently. And experiencing this is a vital part of everyone's education.

Listening in a new world

Moments into our first morning in the Spinney woods with a class of four and five year olds, Adam looked across the ditch and announced: *'This tree is bigger than earth!'* Like Kelvin's words his statement was minimal but deeply provocative. How could a tree be bigger than the earth? What did Adam mean? Why was his language of *exaggeration and extraordinary possibility* the right one for this moment, in this place? Two of the children standing next to Adam made statements in response:

Tania: *'I can climb big trees.'*

Yana: *'If the sun is bigger than earth it is really enormous.'*

I find it fascinating that nobody who heard Adam tried to contradict him. Someone could have pointed out that the tree was growing next to a whole group of other trees so clearly wasn't bigger than the whole earth. But nobody did. Adam's statement was treated as an

invitation to talk about massive things. It was a statement made in a language other children understand well; a brilliant language of unlikely possibility, *a fantastical language*, that captured their sense of entering an unexplored world where anything might happen.

It was the kind of language we heard many times that morning, and in the weeks to come and it was a lasting language, still audible a year later when I returned to work with the same children, now in Year 1, along with the seven and eight year olds in Year 3.

Truth and fantasy

This second project in the Spinney began in January 2015 and had a specific focus: to explore the woods as a place for developing language and creative writing. You might imagine a language that combines fact and fiction would belong only to very young children but it had become stronger and more nuanced as the younger children had grown, and was even more dramatically developed in the seven and eight year olds:

JJ: *'I found this ditch called the awesome ditch.'*

Sevgi: *'It's called the mouth of the mud monster.'*

Antonia: *'This is an earthquake monster that makes earthquakes every thousands of years. When have you ever seen earthquakes? But this is the earth moving.'*

In the afternoon following their first visit to the woods, I invited the older children to map the Spinney. Before we began I introduced images and words from 16th and 17th century cartographers, maps with monsters prowling their unknown edges, and with the help of class teacher Emily Garrill, we debated the nature of maps; how they represent beliefs and ideas as well as facts, what they leave unmapped.

When it came to mapping the Spinney all the children knew exactly what they wanted to represent. A huge collaborative drawing extended across the floor, with landmarks, monsters and maps inside monsters. On a smaller piece of paper Michael drew a schematic plan, labelling the *'grass, school meadow, neighbours, log pile, log circle'* and *'entrance'*. Viren also drew the neighbouring houses and fence, but they were about to be eaten by an enormous underground snake.

Listening to children means taking their ideas seriously, discovering and exploring connections to other voices; knowing for example, that a mapping language which combines fact and fiction is thought-provoking but not confused, and has a long history. A map may have accuracy in terms of physical layout and landmarks, but it can have accuracy of the imagination too; the fantastical mapping languages children develop as they explore wild places are poetic but also detailed and precise as any topography.

'The big white eye of the woods'

In the five and six year olds' classroom a thought-provoking language was developing too. We invited the children to imagine the woods at night, inspired by Jackie Kay's poem *The World of Trees* in which she describes the moon as *'the big white eye of the woods.'* We offered a simple shadow screen made from a white sheet pinned to the ceiling, and dark paper with chalk pastels. The children worked all afternoon with light and shadow, and dark

drawings. Beginning with these visual languages they soon had dramatic stories to put into words:

'Lava is flowing in the woods, burning the trees. A volcano exploded, lava is spraying all over the air. When it was spraying it set the moon and sky on fire. Lava is trying to burn the woods, and the water is stopping it.' Zach (working in pastel on black paper)

'The wind blew even stronger and stronger, until the moon came again. And the sun came, but it was too late for day-time...every time it was morning it was too late, because the moon came. All of the creatures were making it night time, all the time, every day.' Megan (narrating her shadow play)

There was drama on a grand scale, questions of life and death, chaos and order, the elements of fire, water, air and earth, the world as we experience it and the universe beyond. The children's stories did not easily fit into categories of fact or fiction but explored the extraordinary possibilities of both. *What if there was a battle between night and day? Between fire and water? What if creatures controlled time? What if a worm could become a snake?*

Tricks and technologies

My motivation for writing this article is to provoke a re-consideration of what listening to children and working with language really means. I have worked in many different settings with many educators and children, and I've often heard children's words quoted as *funny, sweet, bewildering or momentarily profound*. But I think there is much more going on when children combine fact and fiction into fantastical languages, and there is a long human history to it.

Every technology we have invented to document the 'real' world – drawing, painting, film, sound recording, photography – has also been used to conjure, play and confuse. The first moving films in the nineteenth century recorded workers leaving a factory, delegates arriving at a conference, a train pulling into a station. A few years later George Méliès who began by filming historical reconstructions, was creating fantastical worlds and fantasy films – films 'shot' under the sea, in space, with monstrous creatures, rockets, illusions of all kinds. Seventeenth century 'bestiaries', what we might call zoological textbooks now, were full of meticulously observed drawings and descriptions of animal species from around the world. But they also included rogue pages of fanciful creatures, like the tiny 'monkey of the inkpot' in China, who sits by scribes and waits patiently for them to finish writing so it can drink the leftover ink.

Children in the woods are doing what we have always done. Looking closely at detail, seeing what is really there, imagining other possibilities, wondering *'when will it be a snake?'* Once we can see the cultural richness of this language we can work strongly with it and value statements and questions like Kelvin's. We can encourage children to play with language as with any other material; finding its limits, testing its powers, discovering its ways of representing and inventing the world.

Playing with words

If we hold an image of the child as powerful and rich in understanding and invention, part of the child's expressive potential will come from an ability to put things into words. Language is a symbolic system which needs to be learned but it is also a *power*. Children need plenty of time to meet words and play with them. They need to learn the conventions and rules of language but they also have the right to upturn any of these and see what happens.

Words are powerful *and* playful. We use words to tell the truth *and* we use words to make things up; we often do both at the same time, and if we are allowed to, we begin early in life. I believe it's part of our job as educators, to make time and opportunity not only for this to happen, but to listen carefully when it does, and to learn from our listening.

Renowned writer and educator Judith Graham, tells a story of a boy the same age as Kelvin, proudly showing his teacher the first sentence he has written by himself. Five words: 'I went to the park.' But then, she says, with a look of excited incredulity he added: 'But I didn't!' Discovering writing is powerful. Discovering that what looks like fact can also be fiction, is perhaps more powerful still.

Notes for end:

- Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination is an arts organisation working across Cambridgeshire to develop and support creative projects. Our *Footprints* work often brings together children of nursery or reception age, their educators, and families in local wild spaces.
- CCI's projects at the Spinney began in 2014, and most recently involved a collaboration with poet Jackie Kay. Poems and images from this project by Jackie and the children, and illustrator Elena Arévalo Melville, are now published in *A Poem of a Dream of the Woods*, available to read online or purchase from the CCI website, where you can read about more of our work and values:
<http://www.cambridgecandi.org.uk/>