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In the Woods, Alive and Kicking

by Tom Dobson

At the beginning of May, I spent a day in the woods of Blackhills Scout Camp with Alive and Kicking Theatre Company and 44 year 2 children from a Leeds primary school as part of a project funded by Leeds Beckett University to explore the ways in which drama can be used with young children and their parents to create imaginary worlds. The primary school is located in a ward which is amongst the 10% of poorest wards in the country.

I observed the children and I spoke with them, their teachers, their parents and the drama company, writing everything down in my journal. Three members of the drama company also offered their own reflections on the day through email. At the end of the week, I read through my journal and the emails and identified three themes: the strangeness of the woods as experienced by the children; the ways in which the woods and the drama experience fired the children's imaginations; and the different roles that accompanying teachers, teaching assistants and parents took in supporting the children's experience.

Here these themes are presented as part of a 'knitted narrative' – a form of enquiry which, through the juxtapositioning of different texts and voices, enables the researcher and the reader to explore the relationships between relevant discourses (Heydon, 2009).

In this knitted narrative, our experience of the day in the woods is set against a backdrop of responses to current government policy and testing, particularly in relation to Key Stage 1 English. As I wanted to put the effects of policy within an historical context, I also quote from other academics and literary writers, including William Blake (1794) and Charles Dickens (1854), whose concerns about children's education clearly echo many of the concerns which we hold today.

Having received ethical clearance from the University, I here present the voices from the woods below in italics – all are anonymised, with the drama company using the names of the characters they played that day.

The strangeness of the woods

The children step off the coach and are greeted by myself and two scout leaders. They are excited and begin to talk about the characters they have met at school and the characters they have been told they might meet in the woods.

One child says, "I hope Lady Lackleaf doesn't steal our sandwiches."

Another child asks me if I have seen Tom Wayfinder.

As we follow the scout leaders into the woods, one child is smiling and says, "I can hear leaves crunching."

Another child points to the ground and says, "I don't like these scratchy bits".

I speak to one of the parents who says to me, "My daughter, it's the first time she's been in the woods. She is very happy."

Later, over lunch, the headteacher tells me, "Some of the children don't know what moss is. They have never seen moss before."

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve.

(Dickens, 1854)

Now inside the woods, the children are greeted by an elderly man wearing a long dark jacket and a flat cap who emerges from the undergrowth.

"Tom!" the children shout enthusiastically. "It's Tom Wayfinder," they tell each other.

Tom greets them with a smile but then he quickly turns serious. "There is a problem," Tom tells them. "I'm going to read you a letter. It's about The Wildman."

The children are silent. All that can be heard is the sound of the birds singing in the trees.

How can the bird that is born for joy

Sit in a cage and sing?

How can a child, when fears annoy,

But droop his tender wing,

And forget his youthful spring!

(Blake, 1794)



"Is he there?" the children ask as they hear the melancholy sound of an approaching flute.

A figure dressed in green and wearing a red balaclava comes into view.

The children are transfixed by the sight of The Wildman.

The Wildman turns to Tom. The Wildman turns to the children. "It's all gone," he sighs.

"Don't worry," one child responds. "We'll get everything back for you."



Determined to help The Wildman by finding Jack Frost, Lady Lackleaf and Old Man Winter, the children approach the woods differently in their different groups. Some are eager to discover these character they have heard so much about; others are visibly anxious, scared even. For all of them, the characters are real.

It is not long before I can hear one of the children shouting, "I've found Old Man Winter, he's over there!"

Each of group of children discovers their character and the characters are clearly part of the scenery. The woods have become their home. The children encounter them as if they have always been there.



The next day Lady Lackleaf wrote, “When I heard the children coming closer, I found a space on the edge of my clearing with my back to them. I busied myself pulling dead leaves from a branch and watching them fall to the ground. I held my space, which meant that the children had to find the courage to enter the clearing and initiate our conversation.”

And Old Man Winter reflected, “Some children were clearly released by being in the woods and it unlocked their sense of play and fun. It was clear that some of the children were not used to having space and freedom to use on their own – and clustered around teachers or each other.”

The journey into the wood is part of the journey of the psyche from birth through death to rebirth. Hansel and Gretel, the woodcutter's children, are familiar with the wood's verges but not its heart. Snow White is abandoned in the forest. What happens to us in the depths of the wood? Civilisation and its discontents give way to the irrational and half-seen. Back in the village, with our soured relationships, we are neurotic, but the wood releases our full-blown madness. Birds and animals talk to us, departed souls speak. The tiny rush-light of the cottages is only a fading memory. Lost in the extinguishing darkness, we cannot see our hand before our face. We lose all sense of our body's boundaries. We melt into the trees, into the bark and the sap. From this green blood we draw new life, and are healed.

(Mantel, 2009)

Over lunch, one of the teachers said to me, “It changes the children. One girl, she is always putting herself down, but here she’s been a leader. Another girl, she’s never been to the woods before. She was scared at first, but now that she’s been here, she’s really proud of herself.”

The Imagination

‘Girl number twenty,’ said the gentleman, smiling in the calm strength of knowledge. Sissy blushed, and stood up.

‘So you would carpet your room—or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband—with representations of flowers, would you?’ said the gentleman. ‘Why would you?’

‘If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers,’ returned the girl.

‘And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?’

‘It wouldn’t hurt them, sir. They wouldn’t crush and wither, if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy—’

‘Ay, ay, ay! But you mustn’t fancy,’ cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. ‘That’s it! You are never to fancy.’

‘You are not, Cecilia Jupe,’ Thomas Gradgrind solemnly repeated, ‘to do anything of that kind.’

'Fact, fact, fact!' said the gentleman. And 'Fact, fact, fact!' repeated Thomas Gradgrind.
(Dickens, 1854)

The new syllabus was described as "Gradgrind Gove's pub quiz curriculum" by one teachers' leader at the National Union of Teachers' annual conference.
(Garner, 2013)

As they trail through the woods looking for the character, the children can be heard calling out in unison, "We've got the power of imagination!"

One of the groups is creating spells with Old Man Winter. For Old Man Winter, the spells, "relate to the imaginary world that the children had co-created, reinforcing their commitment to the fiction: a spell to bring back the seasons in their proper order; a spell to bring peace and harmony to the world and everyone in the wood; a spell to make a rainbow! The spells were all different shapes and sizes and seemed to come out of the children's imaginations."



Another group is busy building hedgehog shelters for Lady Lackleaf. They work together to make sure their shelters are strong and hedgehog-sized and once they have finished they look up at Lady Lackleaf expectantly.

Despite her best efforts, Lady Lackleaf cannot hide the fact that she is impressed. Almost reluctantly, she hands over one of the precious pots to the children.

"Tom Wayfinder will be very proud of us!" a child beams.

At lunchtime, the headteacher says, "In 2 weeks' time these little kids have to do their SATs. What's that going to teach them?"

12. Tick the **noun phrase** below.

- the tiny insect
- so quickly
- had been eating
- very colourful

(Standards & Testing Agency, 2017)

Explicit knowledge of grammar is very important, as it gives us more conscious control and choice in our language. Building this knowledge is best achieved through a focus on grammar within the teaching of reading, writing and speaking. Once pupils are familiar with a grammatical concept [for example 'modal verb'], they should be encouraged to apply and explore this concept in the grammar of their own speech and writing and to note where it is used by others.

(DfE, 2013, p.64)

Two well-regarded and influential experimental trials that had a significant effect on policy, and that focused on the effectiveness of grammar teaching to support pupils' writing, are examined in detail. In addition to the analysis of their methodology, the nature of the two trials is also considered in relation to other key studies in the field of grammar teaching for writing and a recently published robust RCT. The paper shows a significant and persistent mismatch between national curriculum policy in England and the robust evidence that is available with regard to the teaching of writing. It is concluded that there is a need for better evidence-informed decisions by policy makers to ensure a national curriculum specification for writing that is more likely to have positive impact on pupils.

(Wyse and Torgerson, 2017, p.1019)

Once all three pots have been found, three of children volunteer to take the pots back to The Wildman. These three children walk slowly, lagging behind the rest of the group, as if they are part of a funeral procession. The pots they are carrying are like precious and delicate jewels which they must protect solemnly as if their lives depend upon it.



When they arrive at a small clearing, the children gather round The Wildman and he tells them how proud he is and the children tell him about the characters they have met.

One by one, the characters emerge from the woods to join in the Ceremony of the Pots.

Once again, the children are transfixed by the sight of the characters.

When the ceremony is over, the characters return and it's Tom Wayfinder's turn to leave the children.

"This is my home," Tom tells them. Arm in arm with The Wildman, Tom Wayfinder leaves the children and disappears into the darkness of the woods.

There is silence.

This time, even the birds are silent.

Eventually one of the children asks, "Will Tom come back to see us?"

One of the teachers is crying.

The Role of Adults

Practices in a landscape subsume one another. For instance, a detailed national curriculum with minute prescriptions and regular inspections will definitely influence the practice of teachers. Such radical combination of curriculum design and enforcement may silence the perspectives of teachers or render the competence of their practice invisible or irrelevant.

(Wenger-Trayner and Wenger Trayner, 2015, p.17)

'In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!'

The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged

in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

(Dickens, 1854)

Lady Lackleaf thought about the ways in which the teachers and the parents had interacted with children. "Once I had set the tasks," she wrote, "it was interesting to note the difference between the role of the teacher and the parent." Lady Lackleaf was aware that the teachers felt their main role was to keep an overall eye on the children, to ensure their wellbeing and safety. The parents, however, were freed up to "play alongside their children in any set task. They stepped into the drama by joining in the tasks and being creative within the group. Parents tended to lead from within or take the lead from the children compared to teachers who lead from without."

Jack Frost also noted the role one particular parent had taken in one of his tasks. Jack Frost wrote, "In one group a parent led the picture making by encouraging the children to make a three dimensional sculptural portrait of Jack Frost. He made the first move by sticking a stick in the ground which became the body. Without this intervention the children would have probably created a two dimensional picture within the frame. So there is boldness of action and permission to break the 2 dimensional frame. I think the groups worked far more effectively when the adults were inside the drama activity with the children just because it maintained a dramatic tension - this task/encounter is important for all us, we are all implicated."

Over lunch I spoke to the parent who had helped make the sculpture of Jack Frost. I asked him whether he had been to any of the other sessions at school and which he had preferred. He told me he had been to most of them and that the lesson he preferred was the one from last week.

"Last week the children were left in charge," he smiled. "What they came up with was extraordinary. They performed above and beyond my imagination."

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