

Words in the Woods Project – Teachers' Thoughts & Reflections

Marie-Louise Archibald, Nursery Teacher, St Joseph's School

If I were to close my eyes and conjure up a mind picture of the many magical experiences St Joseph's Nursery children enjoyed in Hensol Forest I would instantly recall one very lovely and dear little girl. Let me introduce you to Katie who, of course, as a class teacher, I knew so well. Had I not just written her end of year report to be handed out the day of our visit to Hensol Forest and were not my professional observations and comments still milling around my head? You see, Katie was a flibberty gibbet, a butterfly, a still ego-centric child who lived in her own little dream world with little or no awareness of what was going on around her.

Imagine my utter surprise when from the first glimpse of the giant pencils hanging on the trees, Katie became totally engrossed in the drama unfolding before her eyes. Her concentration was unwavering, her gaze fixed on the thread of ribbons and string of glimmering lanterns that led us all into the forest clearing. Katie stood transfixed at the front of our group of children as her eyes feasted on the scenario in the glade. With ears pricked and her head tilted upwards towards 'the fairy' she was transported to another world. Was that Katie's voice shouting out loudly and confidently as she engaged with the narrative unravelling before her? Did she really stand rooted to the spot caught in a bubble of delicious suspense? Was she actually the first child to scoop up the feathers from the forest floor and press them lovingly into 'the fairy's hand? The simple answer is yes.

On reflection, this opportunity to witness Katie's participation and sheer joy in this drama was one of the most wonderful moments in my teaching career. Together we had unlocked a door for a young child, transported her to another world which she of course already knew so very well in her own imagination, and we were rewarded with a glimpse of Katie as a key player on a stage where she understood every rule in the book. This was her world, a world without walls and boundaries, free of do's and don'ts, a world to be explored and enjoyed without the ticking of a clock and the ring of a school bell.

P.S. As we were leaving Hensol Forest, I had to catch Katie's hand and lead her to the bus to join the group of children. She was in fact trotting up the path after 'the fairy' with her hands out stretched in a gesture that begged for the magic not to end.

Marie Shalom, Nursery Teacher, St Andrews Major

What a fabulous experience, both for the children and the adults which highlighted for me the importance of watching, listening, observing, taking a step back, giving the children plenty of time to think and try and work it out themselves – who had put those ribbons and pencils there and why?

One of the most fascinating things for me was observing the children out of their 'comfort zone' –the children who only come to Nursery because they are brought – (no other reason because they already know everything at 3 / 4 years old!!!) were the children who appeared more 'unsure' of the experience and yet the children who tended to shy away from sharing their thoughts voluntarily at school were almost 'bursting' with ideas of who might have done these things and why!!!

The whole experience was truly magical, memories of which will last with me and the children for many years to come!

Claire Phillips, Reception class teacher, St. Brides Major Church in Wales Primary

The forest experience evoked excitement, passion and magical thoughts in the children which then led to them initiating a vast number of cross-curricular links.

Story writing can be a daunting task for some who are less imaginative, but the forest awakened imaginative thoughts and questions in every child, which then led to unimaginable consequences.

Each child linked their forest experience to experiences they had already had and they built on these to create their stories, which gave us huge links to the area of learning; knowledge and understanding of the world and avenues to investigate using the almighty internet and the classroom globe.

Music was high lighted from the forest experience. One child became a song writer,

Sail away boat,

Sail away Saturday,

Cos you found her on Saturday –

this led to the un-tuned percussion instruments being dragged out of the music cupboard and the children played till my ears almost bled!

Hannah's soup had also caused a stir! The children wondered and wondered and wondered what the magic soup must taste like, they had lots of thoughts on what it could make you do but they had no idea of what it would really taste like.

So in order to find out what soup made in the outdoors tasted like we went to the vegetable garden and dug up some of our vegetables and we made some soup and we ate it and we wanted some more and we thought this must taste much nicer than magic soup, plus it will make us big and strong because its full of goodness and vitamins.

Through these experiences the children consolidated their knowledge and understanding of what plants and vegetables needed to grow, where the vegetables actually came from (before Tesco's) and how they could change state, which is where all the magic of science and D.T. came in to our project.

The children also became schematic about drawing maps, magical maps, which then grew into magical treasure maps. Large pieces of paper were provided so that small groups of friends could draw their own adventures giving a beginning, a middle, and an end. The structure for story writing!

This linked to previous research that I had undertaken to find out how children's art work affected the quality of their story writing. During my research it was conclusive that if a child drew their picture before writing their story then their descriptive language was greatly improved. The Words in the Woods project didn't ask the children to draw their picture before writing their story it invited them to become a part of it, challenging all of their previous ideas and making them the main character in an exciting adventure.

So the Words in the Woods project didn't stop there it was only the beginning of lots of wonderful cross-curricular things to come. So from a forest, a Hannah dressed as a fairy, a big Jack in a tree, Sarah the kind helpful lady and Sheena the forest girl many avenues were opened which spanned across the whole curriculum but most of all the wonderful world of language.

Liz Stone, Nursery Teacher, Eagleswell Primary School

Hannah: There was a fairy in the forest and it talked

Everyone is very excited and the children are buzzing with the all that is going on. Sarah draws attention to a gap in the trees by the side of the path there are chimes hanging on a branch. Sarah asks the children if she should go and look there is group approval and she

disappears into the foliage moments later she reappears to say it is OK. The adventurers move forward pushing back leaves and scrambling up the bank we follow a path upwards through trees that are quite close together and there we find a REAL campfire AND a woodland shelter. The atmosphere under the leafy canopy starts to weave the awe and wonder of what is about to happen. The children make lots of observations speaking in whispery voices,

“Look a pot on the fire”

“I can see a Teddy”

But then they hear the singing and we are transfixed, it was a truly magical moment. I was honoured to see the wide-eyed wonderment of the children and to be there for the small hand clutching mine in an unsure moment. We all had the feeling that we had been coated in fairy dust and that the glitter on our hands could never be washed off. Experiencing the awe and wonder has inspired me to step up and want to wave my own wand of enchantment to try and create something that is magical and special at my own Nursery.

Words in the Woods brought many emotions to the surface stimulating aesthetically and orally by enriching children’s language as they were challenged by things, which were not usually seen on a woodland walk. Natasha tells us later that she looked through tenniscopes to see pirates and inocubuses to see owls.

In a very short time there was a bonding between the children and the actors, which resulted in a true feeling of loss when we had to leave.

Children who had spoken very little in the past were able to vocalise their feelings. One of the children from St. Joseph’s who had been integrated from Ashgrove was described as being on the autistic spectrum, a non-communicator and made only some sounds.

Her story: Bear sad man tree fairy walking

Do you remember this? (pointing to Jack)

Man

Where was he?

Tree

Who am I?(pointing to self)

Fairy.

(Pointing to photo of man and fairy on the path)

Walking

Less confident children in the classroom happily responded to questions. Children who were familiar with woodland walks were virtually ‘speechless’ as they tried to comprehend the woodland characters.

I feel it is important to understand the total engagement that took place which was then treasured and transferred back to the individual setting. Opportunities were given to revisit and sustain the experience they had in the woods and explore further.....pretend camp fires, den building, soup making and fairy dust.....

WHAT HAD GONE ON, IT MUST HAVE BEEN A REAL FAIRY BECAUSE SHE HAD WINGS.