



Using Egan's Imaginative Approach to Teaching:

## Mythic Understanding and the Foundation Phase

In this article **Sue Lyle** explores some of the practical implications of Kieran Egan's imaginative approach to teaching outlined by Rod Cunningham. The focus for this issue is the Mythic framework and how it can be applied to children between the ages of 3-7 (The Foundation Phase and Key Stage 1 in England; The Foundation Stage in Wales 3-7). In the next issue she will look at Romantic Understanding with the 8-13 age group.

begin this discussion of Egan's Mythic Framework with a story told by a teacher during a Philosophy for Children (P4C) training course. She teaches five and six year olds and this is her story.

*One day a girl in my class came to school with a matchbox. Inside the matchbox, nestling in cotton wool, was a sycamore seed. The girl carefully open the box and explained to the group of children at her table that the night before she had put a tooth under her pillow and in the morning, as well as a pound coin, she had found 'a fairy's wing'. The children were instantly animated and as I observed I made a note of their responses. A series of questions were fired off:*

- 'Does that mean the fairy can't fly anymore?'
- 'Do fairies have one wing or two on each side?'
- 'Can wings grow back?'
- 'Do fairies lose their wings like snakes lose their skins?'



Answers to these questions led to hypothesis and speculation:

'If the fairy had two wings on each side and only lost one she would still be able to fly?'

'Yes, but not properly, she would be, like, disabled'

One child started moving his hand and arm round in a circle and said:

'If she only had one wing on one side she would only be able to fly in a circle'.

The teacher was amazed at their discussion and surprised at the content: her Key Stage 1 curriculum had rarely provoked such an imaginative response. The children were emotionally engaged and this engagement provoked a level of language and discussion of a much higher order than usual. This conversation makes a good starting point for a discussion of Egan's Mythic Planning Framework which he argues has the potential to make such pupil engagement and outcomes commonplace. Egan gives us clear guidelines on how we can use his Framework as a tool for planning and I want to explore how this might work for a busy primary school teacher.

Before considering the framework in detail I want to explore some of the concepts that underpin it. To help me do this I am going to recount another teacher story.

A head teacher told of a conversation she had had with her six year old son following the first day of a Philosophy for Children training course. The previous evening her son had asked her a question, 'Is Grandpa in heaven?' She told us that her normal response would have been to reassure her child – 'of course he is darling', but this time she stopped to reflect. On the course we had been considering the importance of children's questions and how they should be taken seriously, so instead of reassuring him she asked him why he wanted to know. She also told us that her father had died a year before when her son was five. This is what he said:

'Well, I've been thinking. When you die do the angels come down and get you straight away. And the thing is, Grandpa was really fat and I wondered whether one angel would be able to carry him. And then I thought do they send two angels down. And then I thought do you grow your wings straight away and fly up to heaven. And if Grandpa did that what would happen when he got there? 'Cos Grandpa was really fat – would there have been room for him?'

Angels, heaven, God, fairies? Are these the kind of topics that engage our youngest children and stimulate their

imagination? Kieran Egan thinks so and I agree with him. What adult would seriously ask a child under seven if Santa Claus was real? Very few children of that age would ask, 'Does Santa exist?' 'Do fairies exist?' 'Does heaven exist?' The question for the young child is not *whether* they exist or not, but what these things are like. And they desperately want to explore such questions.

So far so good, my examples appear to promote pupil emotional engagement. But let's not rely on a couple of anecdotes – I want to turn to the work of Vivian Gussin Paley to provide more insight into children of this age and what engages them emotionally.

Vivian was a kindergarten teacher for thirty seven years and during this time she collected thousands of recordings of her pupils talking. The transcripts became the focus for a number of books written over the last 25 years that have much to tell us.

In a recent book summarising some of her ideas, Paley (2004) declares herself an ardent proponent of fantasy play. She argues that anyone who spends time with young children will quickly recognise their passionate attachment to fantasy and their need to create, tell and act out their own narratives. Her books present young children as complex thinkers who need to express their thoughts through play to bring them to life. She goes further and suggests that fantasy play is a necessary precursor for every kind of learning in classrooms. This fits in with Egan's (2005) suggestion that drama and role-play is important to developing children's understanding through the Mythic Framework. Such views are also supported by Vygotsky who strongly argues for the role of fantasy play to support children's exploration of ideas. As Paley (2004) suggests, '*Pretending* enables us to ask "What if?" ' For Paley fantasy play should be the foundation of early childhood education and she provides plenty of evidence to support this.

Staying with the theme of fairies, I turn to some dialogue from six year olds in Paley's class to illustrate young children's ideas about fairies (Paley, 1981: 38). Kim, a child in Vivien's class told another child that her cousin had fooled the tooth fairy by placing a





their fantasy worlds. Their ability to use thinking skills is clearly evident.

What Egan brings so sharply to our attention is a false dichotomy: the affective and the cognitive. He argues that there is no cognitive gain if the affective is not engaged. Unless we care about the topic and have some emotional engagement with it, the cognitive will not follow – it is not a case of either/or, for true learning to take place we must have both. He points out that the story is the primary way in which we think about our lives and our worlds, we live and breathe through story, without story we don't exist. It follows therefore that finding the story in our curriculum topics must be the starting point for planning. Find a good story and you will get emotional engagement.

Egan asks us then to consider some of the components of good stories to help us identify tools to shape our curriculum stories. Important in many of the children's discussions recorded by Paley is the cognitive device of binary opposites. Egan (1988) argues that binary opposites play a central role in mediating young children's understanding of story and therefore of the world and they are an important planning tool in his Mythic Framework. In support of his arguments he refers us to that universal phenomenon, the fairy tale, and explains how important binary opposites are to the understanding of these stories. In fairy tales, people are beautiful or ugly, rich or poor, wicked or good, brave or cowardly, honest or deceitful, loyal or treacherous, weak or strong and so on. Egan asks us to consider why every culture in the world tells such stories to their youngest children if they can't engage with such abstract concepts. Staying with the universal success of fairy tales in transmitting culture, in his Mythic Framework, Egan calls on teachers to identify the binary opposites in the topics they choose to plan for children.

Let's stop for a moment and consider some of the implications for these claims. The presence of abstract concepts in stories created for young children is a universal truth and as such provides a challenge to the widely accepted belief that young children cannot engage with such concepts. This raises an important question: why would all cultures everywhere create such stories if young children could not engage with them?

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following Piaget, the folklore of child development accepted children's thinking as moving from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract. Devices such as Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skills served to emphasise this. For Egan such views of child development have 'got it wrong from the beginning'

kernel of corn under her pillow. He responded with disbelief and told Kim, 'you can't fool the tooth fairy'. Vivian decided to ask each group of children in her class what they thought:

**Vivan:** Wally said you can't fool the tooth fairy. Kim thinks you might be able to trick her with a piece of corn.

**Jill:** He's right. You shouldn't try because she wouldn't trick *you*. Only magicians trick people.

**Deanna:** Magicians can make things disappear.

**Lisa:** So can fairies

**Wally:** Magicians make things invisible and fairies don't.

**Eddie:** Wait a minute, Wally! You forgot something. Magicians can't make *themselves* invisible and fairies can become invisible any time they want to.

**Wally:** Oh, yeah! Else how could they take your tooth?

Transcripts from four groups of children are presented in Paley's book and none of the children express any doubt of the tooth fairy's existence. Several children even claim to have seen tooth fairies and no one challenges these stories. Paley asserts that children of this age accept the existence of fairies, magicians, witches and other fantasy characters without question. Examination of their discussions shows them engaging with abstract concepts and using a range of thinking skills to develop their ideas: fairies are good, magicians are bad; fairies can make themselves invisible, magicians can't; fairies can be associated with the pleasant surprises in life, magicians with tricks and mischief. Drawing on the cognitive tools of comparing and contrasting, of looking for similarities and differences, the children build their conceptual understanding through



(Egan 2002). If he is right then much of what passes for good practice in the Early Years and Key Stage 1 will need to be revised.

So far we have considered the power of story, especially fantasy, to engage the affective. We have seen how the binary opposites contained in traditional stories mediate abstract concepts for children and promote cognitive development. A moment's reflection on stories such as Cinderella, the Three Little Pigs or Jack and the Beanstalk can help us to see how they can mediate abstract concepts for children through the device of binary opposites. Concepts such as rich and poor, ugliness and beauty, cleverness and stupidity, good and evil, cowardice and bravery provide rich pickings for children's thinking. It is not only fairy tales, of course, that embody abstract concepts, many of our most popular picture books depend on abstract concepts for their power as proponents of Philosophy for Children argue (see, for example Murriss & Haynes 2000).

Story, emotional engagement, binary opposites: what other cognitive tools does Egan urge us to capitalise on in the Mythic Framework? Less controversial is his view that rhythm, rhyme and pattern resonate with a child's natural way of learning. There are few infant practitioners that would disagree with the notion that stories, poems and songs are food for young minds. The infant classroom has always resonated with the sound of singing, nursery rhymes and poetry. Many of these abound with fantasy and metaphor and this brings us to another of Egan's key cognitive tools: metaphor. Yet again Paley (2004: 40) would agree with him; she argues that 'fantasy play and its immediate connection to story-telling and acting are universally accepted by children' and metaphor is central to this process.

In the fantasy-rich classroom children share and shape metaphors: a door-shape piece of cardboard nailed to the classroom skirting board becomes a 'fairy door', a piece of blue cloth laid on the floor becomes a river to be crossed, creating the need for a 'bridge' to help the fairies get home. A poison river made of blocks threatens the doll corner at its shore, a net covered in cut out paper leaves becomes a forest and a 'magic' cloak turns its wearer into a superhero. Fantasy and imagination are clearly the stuff of early childhood and are rich in metaphor. For the young child a banana becomes a telephone, a pencil a magic wand, a piece of cloth a device for making you invisible, a table with a cloth over a cave or a castle, and yet metaphor doesn't figure in our curriculum documents and requirements for young children.

Let us explore Egan's Mythic Framework a bit more and consider the part that drama and role play can contribute to

teachers' planning and children's understanding. Here again, Vivien Paley's years of experience and research support Egan's theory. She recounts how fantasy play enables children to experience abstract concepts and binary opposites as they move from one strong emotion to the next, 'from pleasure to jealousy, from power to abandonment to recovery' (Paley 2004: 13). She also makes a fundamental point that in fantasy play children 'stretch their language and logic beyond our expectations' – a key requirement of the curriculum and aim of all teachers.

Let us try and sum up how the components of Egan's Mythic Framework for planning the Foundation Phase/Stage are present in Vivien Paley's classroom. In her classroom, story and fantasy play, role-play and dialogue, are the vehicles that promote intellectual growth and emotional intelligence. The fairy tale with its binary opposites mediating abstract concepts provides a wealth of imaginative stimulus and emotional engagement for the young child. Children's ability to engage with metaphor is encouraged and celebrated. In her classroom a story 'stage' is created on the floor by marking out a square using masking tape. The children sit around the stage and take it in turns to act out stories as Vivien reads them. Sometimes the stories are familiar fairy tales, sometimes they are picture books and sometimes they are the children's dictated stories, but every day children act out stories. As they act them out the children bring the stories to life and bring ideas from their fantasy play to the stage and vice versa as variations on the themes, characters and dilemmas from stories form the basis of their role play in the home corner, or the blocks, or the fantasy play areas. The transcripts Paley has collected illustrate this process very clearly. In



a consideration of fairy tales, she argues that 'by the time children are four they can identify and debate many of the issues hidden in

these age-old plots' (Paley 1990). And the content of fairy tales provides food for the imagination in the children's own stories as they become authors. There are dozens of examples in Paley's books, (see for example, Paley 1981). I have picked one from a five year old boy to illustrate:

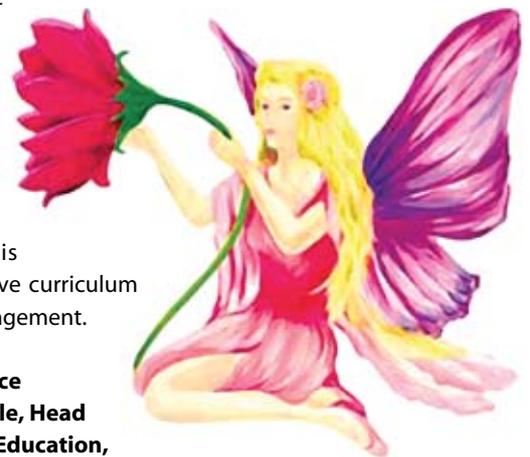
'A soldier and his magic dog met a lonely boy in the forest. "Are you hungry?" said the soldier "I didn't eat for a year," said the boy. "Here's a cake house. Eat the windows". Then an ogre came. "One more bite and I'll eat you!" The magic dog killed the ogre and they all lived in the cake house and didn't eat any more of it.'

As Paley (1981) says, 'Fairy tales stimulate the child's imagination in a way that enlarges the vocabulary, extends narrative skills, and encourages new ideas'. They also meet all Egan's requirements for the Mythic Framework – they engage the imagination, contain binary opposites, are steeped in metaphor, rhyme, rhythm and pattern and offer the potential for drama and role play. Each story has a clear structure where the opposites are mediated and usually resolved.

To sum up, Egan wants us to think of the curriculum as a story to be heard and a story to be told (Egan 1986). He reminds us that good stories are always emotionally engaging, an essential prerequisite in his framework. Having identified how the curriculum can be told through story he asks us to identify what binary opposites best capture the meaning and emotion of the topic. Next he asks us to develop images, metaphors and other forms of creative depiction to promote affective engagement. We are asked to think about what activities can help children experience rhythm, rhyme and pattern, and finally to consider how drama and role play can enhance children's experience.

I have tried to show how the use of fairy tales can provide an easy way in for teachers to become familiar with the Mythic Framework and used Vivian Paley's work to provide some concrete examples. Once the tools have been mastered they can be applied to any aspect of the curriculum. 'Teaching Thinking' would love to hear from teachers who decide to put these ideas into practice. One final word of caution, the Mythic Framework is not something that only applies to the 4-7 curriculum-topics for older children can also be shaped in this way. But for Egan, Mythic Understanding describes the dominant way of thinking for this age group.

In the next issue I look at Romantic Understanding, which Egan argues is the dominant way of thinking for the 8-13 age group, and I consider how this can be used to drive curriculum planning and management.



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