

Delving into Woollvin's wonderful world of picture books



Last week, we had the pleasure of meeting author Bethan Woollvin, who is highly praised for her amazing work by the New York Times. This talented writer and illustrator graduated from Cambridge School of Art with a first-class degree in Illustration. She creates picture books for Early and Pre-readers. Some are original pieces of literature, and some are retellings of classic stories such as Hansel and Gretel and Rapunzel.

As part of our A Level English Language course, we study Child Language Acquisition. This includes child literacy skills of reading and writing. Students are encouraged to carry out observations of children's language, focussing on both written and spoken forms. These observations are not only beneficial to our English course which includes written and spoken data in our examination, but it would also prove useful to aspects of Gabrielle Barrett's Extended Project Qualifications (EPQ) as she intends to create a children's book as part of her final project.

At Gateways, we are very fortunate to have the ability to gain insight into the world of children's language as we house children aged from 2-18 years. This means we can conduct our own linguistic observations on site. We were very excited when we were invited to join Bethan with her audience from Little Gates and Prep.

To start the morning, we gained the experience of watching pre-readers communicate with grown-ups. During our observation of Transition and Reception children, it was fascinating to

watch how they interacted with the author. The children were starstruck as their favourite tales came to life in Bethan's book.

The children sat in a cluster below Woollvin's feet and from here she captured their attention from the very beginning. Her body language was intriguing to watch, as she managed to gain the attention of everyone in the room. Regardless of age, she engaged us all with her spellbinding strategies. She seemed an expert in maintaining the children's attention. We observed how when referencing the power point, she would wiggle her fingers towards each picture. This repeated gesture of fluttering finger motions helped to direct the eyes to the relevant details on screen. We believed this important rhythmic motion helped children to keep their focus on the task. The children were keen to interact with Bethan. They were desperate to share their chosen character for World Book Day. We noticed how confident the children were in their expression and how they were able to use complex sentence structures.

When the children heard that they were going to be able to create their own storyboard based on Hansel and Gretel, their faces filled with joy. Some children were certain they would produce the best ones, and we observed an element of competitiveness among them. Each child chose a lollipop stick with a key word to base their six square storyboards on. There was also the rule of "no writing" to replicate the style of Woollvin's books. The children were adamant in reminding each other about this. They were eager to show us what they had produced; from fairies to dinosaurs filled with bright colours, the children were proud of their creations. This exercise was not only fascinating for the children, stimulating their creativity and making them see the value of images to create meanings but it was also interesting for us to see how they responded to the task.

We found it extremely interesting to witness the interactions between the children and the adults in care of them. Regarding the children, specifically, we noted that they were eager to gain the approval of the adults in response to the storyboards they created. They would frequently leave their table to energetically inform the teachers or Bethan of their progress. They expressed their pride in the colourful images produced on the previously blank piece of paper.

We were able to apply much of the theories learned in class to this session. In accordance with our expectations, teachers commonly used an upward intonation to sound engaged with the child as well as displaying a feature that is referred to by theorists as a 'sing-song quality'. This is where there is an engaging musical aspect to speech, usually employed by adults when communicating with children to ensure they are receiving and processing the information. Specifically, we observed this feature in Bethan, herself; despite not knowing the children, she seemed perfectly comfortable in presenting to children and adjusting her speech to accommodate for those much younger than her. Furthermore, the teachers would bend down to the height of the child to further demonstrate their interest in what the child was saying. Additionally, exclamations were highly significant, such as 'Wow!' As well as others of that kind along with the inclusion of positive adjectives (such as 'amazing' and 'brilliant') in order to

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encourage participation with the task and to provide positive feedback which is an essential aspect of encouraging children's speech.

We would like to thank Mrs Bartle for inviting us to meet Bethan and observe the children.

Gracie, Gabrielle, Faith and Ruby

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