Friday, April 23, 2021

Listening to How Children See their World

MUSEUM NOTES

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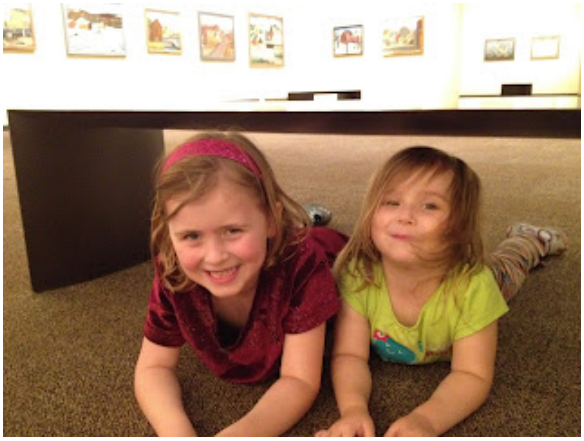


"We're camouflaged as a bench, Mom."

There's a secret passageway from here to there. And I am the only one who knows about it. 6-year-old boy after crawling through a maze at Minnesota Children's Museum (1991)

I feel like a robot who never had a battery. 5-year-old-girl at Bed, Bath, and Beyond to her mother (12/2015)

Barry, do you remember when our block used to be the whole world? 7-year-old Andy (1971)

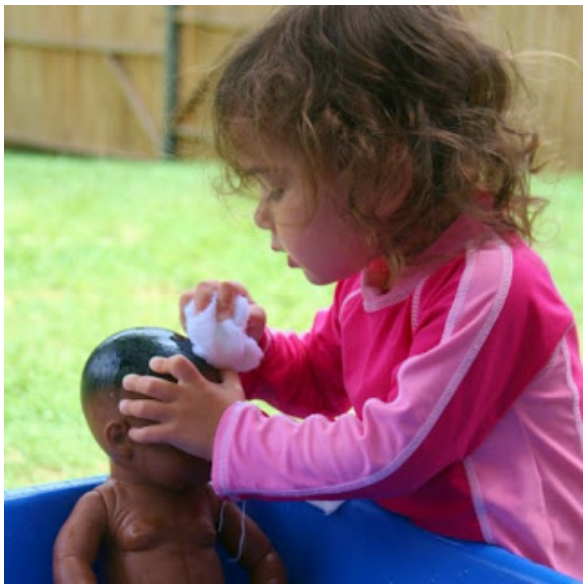
I collect children's words and language. These are just 3 from the dozens of quotes that I have overheard as I have listened in on children's conversations, questions, musings, and discoveries in museums, zoos, stores, airports, restaurants, and family gatherings.

If we notice quotes and anecdotes like these at all, they might evoke a smile or chuckle. We might repeat them to someone else and for an instant, we might appreciate the fresh view of the world they offer. What these words really offer, however, doesn't stop there.

There are words behind words and meanings within meaning. When we observe children or hear their comments, we are enjoying privileged glimpses into how a child understands the world. This thinking out loud hints at what captures their attention; what is interesting and relevant to them; the promise they see in materials and objects; the capabilities they are proud of; and how they see themselves. Children's words and language are a wide, open invitation for reflecting on their thinking and making sense of the world, sharing insights with others, and carrying forward new understandings and choices.

When I reflect on children's words and language, my mind moves over three questions. My intent in doing this is not to prove what I already think or to reinforce a particular theory. Rather, I hope to learn from children, to open new lines in my thinking, and consider fresh possibilities for engaging and supporting

them. This approach can be helpful in learning from children's words, as well as their drawings, play, movements, and constructions.



Listening in on a conversation

What have I heard the child say? When possible, I write down what I overheard, in the child's own words. I add relevant factors about the child including age, place, date, expressive qualities. These notes might include what else is happening: the child's movements, others' presence, interactions with objects or materials, and what preceded or followed this.

What might be the deeper structure of these ideas? Starting with the basics of what I noticed about the child's words, I consider: was it a question? a statement? What words did the child choose; which words stand out? how do they seem to relate to the context? What possible meanings might these words have for this child? What might this suggest about the child's thinking, interests, self-management, or sense of agency?

How might we return these ideas to children? As respectful stewards of children's words and anecdotes, we must make good use of insights and possibilities on the child's behalf. This means exploring new understandings of this particular child or for other children in a similar setting. We can bring new knowledge, explore a promising hunch, and try out some possible conditions to encourage more critical thinking; help the child move further into their encounter; or encourage new connections. And then, we watch, listen, reflect, and repeat.

Don't Step on the Green Dirt

Several years ago, at a family gathering, 4-1/2-year-old Cyrus approached a group of aunts and uncles lounging about and informed us seriously, *Don't step on the green dirt*. He paused and continued, *Well, technically, it's not green dirt*. Cyrus had our attention. We agreed not to step on the green dirt. Uncle Andy and I commented to each other on the use of "technically" (pronounced *tenknikly*). Cyrus turned and sped back to the bushes where his cousins played.

Since that day, this episode has flitted through my mind often and unbidden. If there was something special about green dirt, what was it? How did Cyrus understand the word *technically*? Was he inhabiting a moment of awareness about moving from inside the play frame—*a material or non-material boundary that contains play episodes*—to outside the play frame, from a place where green dirt is possible to where it doesn't exist for others?

When I revisit Cyrus' conversation, I think of how the idea of a play frame might be relevant. How might we support play episodes that extend across days, weeks or months? How can we respect stepping through the play frame? This episode is striking in spotlighting how much play apparently takes place in the child's mind, even though we so often think of play as hands on, physical, and social. Perhaps we should insist on blurring the domains in play.

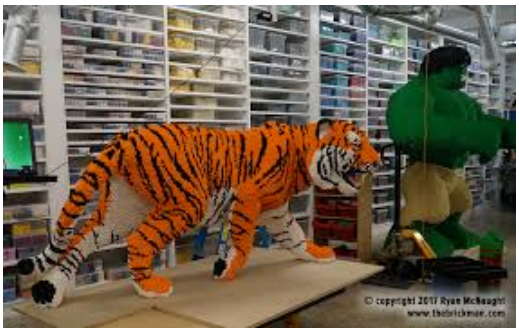
Moreover, we should recognize children as astute and constant observers. A familiar object that has been moved, novel surface materials, or graphic patterns intrigue children and demand investigation. The green dirt prompts thinking about other possible surface materials and finishes and how they may inspire play, exploration, and learning. Even a change in flooring or fluttering shadows launch fresh play scenarios. So,

what unfamiliar materials and surfaces are fascinating? What unusual combinations of materials invite new story paths? How do they build children's fluency with the material world?

Real, Fake, and In Between

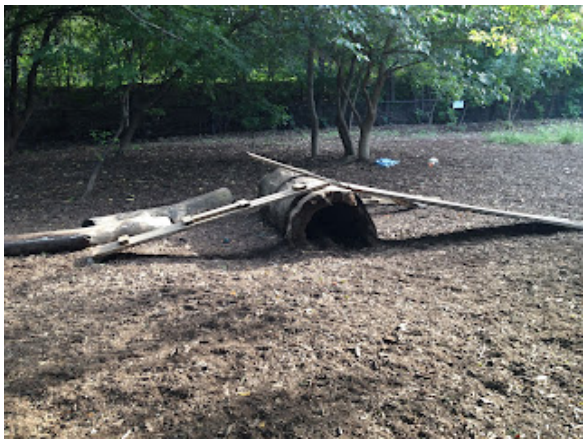
Listening to Cyrus reminds me of several episodes of other children's apparent interest in what is real, fake, or somewhere in between. At her 6th birthday party, Clara received a small potted flowering plant. After being told that it was a primrose, Clara carried the pot around to show each of her guests. In no uncertain terms, she directed each one's attention to the plant, pointing emphatically to the primrose saying, *This is a primrose. And it's real.*

At the Mall of America LEGO Store, 7-year-old Ian had an important message for his sister about the brick constructions when he said, *It looks like it's fake, but it's made of LEGO's.* This distinction continues to intrigue me. I wonder what quality was the obverse of *fake* for Ian. I also wonder how LEGOs fit into this distinction? Is it possible that Ian, and other children, entertain a third quality along with real and fake—our familiar adult dichotomy? Might *real* exist in more than one form for children? Might this third quality enrich children's state of play?



"It looks like it's fake, but..."

This isn't an idle exercise. Museums are settings where authenticity is often a goal; where real and fake are often intermixed; where many distinctions, *imitation*, *pretense*, *genuine*, etc. are applied to objects, artifacts, materials, environments. And children are aware of this.



A *real* hollow log

At the dog park, I overheard a 6-year-old boy explain how to know if a hollow log is real. After crawling through a fallen, hollowed-out log he explained, *If it's too round, too shiny, and there's no dirt, it's not real. They can put moss on it, but it's still not real.* He contrasted this log with one he'd crawled through at a museum.

Based on this admittedly small sample of three children, all 6-7 years old, we can agree that children are concerned with, or interested in, what is *real* and what is *fake*. Even at a young age, they seem to be relatively astute connoisseurs of these important, but somewhat elusive, qualities. *Real* is a distinction that gives something additional value; at least Clara thinks so. The boy climbing through the log understands that things are not always as they seem to be.

Clearly, this distinction is not a simple one and appears to be somewhat flexible with children seeming to occupy a world between real and pretend. Years ago, a 4-year-old boy was looking through binoculars from the mezzanine in Minnesota Children's Museum's Earth World gallery. When a boy standing nearby started to set off the thunder storm, the boy protested, *You can't make a thunderstorm! I am watching birds.*

Children are involved in making distinctions between *real* and *fake* and related qualities that we know too

little about. It's likely that making these distinctions varies among children of different ages and background experiences. We can imagine that these qualities are not firm in a child's mind and are even changeable over a period of time. With only a handful of quotes, we may not be able to confidently answer larger questions about real and fake to guide us in shaping experiences for children. However, even this small sample tells us that these are important aspects of children's worlds and how they engage with them—including their experiences at our museums.

Children's words and language tell us that they have thoughts and ideas about their world, on this and other topics. While there's much we don't know about children as thinkers, explorers, and doers, we can actively learn from them. By listening to them, reflecting on the deeper structure of their words and thoughts, and returning fresh insights to them as experiences, children can enjoy new possibilities and engage with a world rich in discovering.