Preparing the class to work with stories

Establishing a positive listening environment

This unit of work provides rich opportunities to develop children's listening skills because it introduces them to Greek myths through the *spoken* rather than the *written* word. In most classes children's experience of listening to the spoken word will vary considerably, and some children may have had very little. So it is important to create a classroom environment that makes the listening experience as enjoyable as possible and limits potential distractions. Preparation before listening to the story with the class may include:

- making sure children can sit comfortably at their table, or in a carpeted area without disturbing others
- clearing tables of paper, pens etc.
- testing the sound system to see what volume setting is needed for all children to hear clearly
- identifying possible sources of interruption, either from within the class or by outside visitors, and making plans to minimise potential disruption. For instance, children who may need to leave the room can sit closer to the door, so as to slip out without a fuss.
- advising adjoining classes that you will not be able to lend scissors, glue, books, etc. for a short period of time.
- warning other visitors by putting a polite notice on the classroom door, telling them that you are listening to a story and should be disturbed only in an emergency.
- giving children the responsibility for some of this preparation to heighten anticipation and excitement.

An important way to help foster a positive listening environment is to draw up with the class 'rules of engagement' for the classroom which will apply to teachers and pupils alike. Such 'rules' might include:

- We listen carefully.
- We do not interrupt the story. Teachers can, of course, pause it.
- We think about what we hear.
- If we do not understand something, we ask.

At the same time, it will be helpful to establish equivalent rules for speaking in class, for example:

- We share our ideas.
- We talk one at a time.
- We respect each other's opinions.
- We give reasons to explain our ideas.
- If we disagree, we ask 'Why?'
- We try to reach agreement.

For more on classroom 'talking rules', see Neil Mercer (2000), *Words and Minds: how we use language to think together*, Routledge

Listening to the stories

It is important to have an established routine for the children to follow whenever they are listening to stories. Establishing a listening routine minimises distractions, while maximising the children's concentration on the events and language of the story. If the classroom is well organised, children's imaginations are freed to see the story in their own minds and devise personal interpretations of what they are listening to.

Before listening to the story, however, you need to give the children some context: the **starting-points** which we provide for each story suggest avenues for discussion to arouse the children's interest and, when necessary, give information which help them make sense of what they hear. When the story introduces unfamiliar characters, it may be helpful to put their names up on the whiteboard before playing the story, but it is important not to say too much about them – we want the children find out about the characters as the story unfolds.

Before listening to the first story, explain to the children that many of the stories have a short silence at the beginning or after the title. Use the silences to focus the children's anticipation.

Once you start the story, be prepared to pause at least once in order to check understanding and to prepare the children for the next part of the story. The **pause-points** provided with each story suggest key moments to break off from the narrative and possible questions to ask the children.

Once the children have heard the story, you can begin to explore character, motive, action and themes, using the **questions for discussion** on the story page if you wish. It is important to create a democratic forum for discussion which stimulates the children to reflect on what they have heard, encourages them to develop their own response to the story and gives them the confidence to explain their views to their peers. A key means of promoting productive dialogue and discussion is effective questioning, which is characterised by Robin Alexander in his booklet *Towards Dialogic Teaching* (Dialogos; 4th edition 2008) as:

- being anchored in the context and content of the lesson;
- building on previous knowledge;
- eliciting evidence of children's understanding;
- appropriately combining invitations for closed/narrow and open/discursive/speculative responses;
- combining the routine and the probing;
- prompting and challenging thinking and reasoning;
- balancing open-endedness with guidance and structure in order to reduce the possibility for error.