
Dear Michael ...

STEPHEN ROWLAND

Dear Michael,

When I think of the year we spent together in the classroom, I am always taken back to that way of being with young children: close observation; gentle conversation; shared excitement; wondering what the child is experiencing, thinking and planning. And to our conversations once the children had left the classroom at the end of the day, which would go back and forth between the minutest detail of a child's exploration we had observed, to deep philosophical questions about meaning and interpretation. These conversations would regularly continue in your – and later my – writings that evening, often stimulated by lengthy phone conversations.

Now I have young grandchildren I often go back to that reflective state of enquiry. The roles of grandfather, playmate and educational critic in the home can be combined much like teacher and researcher in the classroom: a way of being that seems a million miles away from the prattle of politicians' ignorant attempts to intervene in the intimacy of children's learning.

I remember our times together as I wander around the garden examining bugs under rocks with a four-year-old, or play money games with piles of coins on my seven-year-old granddaughter's bed before she goes to sleep. Such little moments raise so many questions.

Here is a series of scenes involving my granddaughter Ivy, which took me back to this speculative state of mind. If only I could get on the phone to you now to mull it all over, I'm sure we would spark more ideas off each other.

'Gungee' (pronounced with hard g's). 'Gungee, gungee, gungee.'

Ivy, my one-year-old granddaughter, was excitedly pointing at the large plastic sweet jar full of marbles I had brought down to show her. I put a large tray on the floor and poured the marbles onto the tray. She kept repeating 'gungee' as she crawled around the tray, pushed marbles around and then took one out to send spinning across the floor. It rolled under the armchair and was

now out of reach. She toddled back to me and, pointing to the chair, said, 'Gungee, gungee'. I obeyed and retrieved the marble.

So a gungee is a marble is it, I wondered? Gungee was one of her very few words. Dinin was another. Dinin was her older sister, Amber's, way of saying my name, Stephen, which Ivy had adopted.

Ivy had a happy play with the marbles for some while but now it was time for her lunch. While she was eating she looked up at the clock hanging high on the opposite wall. Pointing at it, she again said: 'Dinin. Gungee, gungee'. At first I wondered what she was thinking. I couldn't see any marbles, balls, or any other spherical object. With more pointing and 'gungee's I realised she meant that the round clock was also a gungee.

Marble ... gungee ... clock. Of course, gungee meant circle. Or did it? That seemed to me a very abstract notion for a child who was only just getting on to her feet and uttering her first words.

It was some weeks later, when Ivy and Amber (then three) were staying with us, that they – as was customary – rushed into our bedroom far too early in the morning and scrambled into our bed. My first task was to get them their warm milk. As Ivy was supping hers she was gazing at the ceiling above her. Then, in a quick movement, she removed the bottle from her lips, pointed to the ceiling, and said, 'Gungee, gungee, gungee'.

Now this was a puzzle to me. There was nothing that looked like a clock or a circle or a ball on the ceiling. What was the gungee? Then I noticed the lampshade. This was not spherical. But it was a bit like a semi-spherical dome, with a 12-sided polygonal (rather than circular) cross-section open at the bottom. Although she was viewing the lampshade obliquely – it was not directly above her – she must have realised that its cross-section, or entrance, as it would look viewed from beneath, was almost circular.

Amber was interested in her younger sister's word 'gungee'. They played games of trying to find out what things could be counted as 'gungee's. 'Gungee' was soon joined by other inventions in Ivy's vocabulary. 'Laloo', for example, meant doll. Her favourite doll was black and she called that 'black Laloo'.

In the lavatory there is a blackboard and easel for Ivy and Amber to use. It is an added incentive for the children to use the loo on their own. It also means that we are left drawings which are often quite different from the ones they may do sitting at the kitchen table with adults around. It was now a little less than a year or so since the gungee episode. Ivy was two and had just started in the day nursery. Her mother (my daughter, Alice) told me that, according to her nursery teacher, Ivy had that day made her first drawing of a person. At least, that's what the nursery teacher had thought, but she wasn't *quite* sure it was a person. So when, the next day, I went into the lavatory and discovered the blackboard with a big circular chalk mark on it, I thought this may be the first person she has drawn that I have seen. Was it mummy? Or even better, was it me? Most – but not all – of the first drawings of people I have seen by very young children were some kind of circle with perhaps a couple of arms and legs. This seemed

to me a precious moment. It was also a hypothesis to be tested. Was this Ivy's early attempt at a person?

The next time I heard Ivy in the lavatory, I came in to talk with her. Admiring her drawing and wanting to encourage her without imposing my own interpretation onto her, I said 'That's nice. What is it?' As soon as I had asked the question I realised it sounded insincere and stupid. Just imagine saying that to an artist, I thought. Sometimes the simplest questions are hardest to pose. Ivy gave me a strange look (which I felt I deserved), as though it was indeed a very silly question. 'A circle', she said. Her face appeared to add 'of course, silly Dinin'.

I have reflected upon this story many times. It raises many questions to which I can suggest few answers. What exactly was Ivy's 'concept' of gungee? Was it dynamic: first a marble; then – on seeing the similarity of shape in the clock – a circle; then, with the lampshade, some more generalised quality of circularity? And was she already able to 'decentre' sufficiently to realise how the lampshade would have looked like a circle viewed from directly below? Moreover, what does it mean to enquire of a child 'what is their concept of?' And there is no knowing where her apparently invented word originated.

And what about my hypothesis of the early drawing of a person? Did her explanation that her drawing was a circle mean that it was not a person? Had I instead asked her who it was, might she have answered 'mummy' or some such? Was mummy, *very* approximately circle shaped as she had drawn, yet another gungee, perhaps? Or did she see that it was, of course, a circle, but that this was just the first stage of drawing a person: she hadn't yet added the arms and legs, perhaps? Or was this indeed a circle, which she seemed to have drawn with considerable care, and so could be understood as a continuation of her investigation that started with the marbles, and nothing to do with mummy or anyone else? This is all about the complicated relationship between development of drawing and cognitive development.

If, as it seemed to me at the time, her facial expression indicated that she thought my question was inappropriate, this could indicate that it was, *of course*, the quality of circularity that interested her. Even at this early age she had given the impression of being a thinker (her great grandmother commented that in the photo taken of her just after she was born she looked like Buddha). But, conversely, her look could have indicated that surely I should know that doing a circle is how you start a person drawing.

But beyond such questions as these, there are even more difficult ones about my observational or 'research' method. How do I attempt to understand the very young child without intervening in ways that radically change what is happening? No doubt, my question, and her answer, blocked off certain further avenues of enquiry for her but opened up others. How – and why – do I ask questions of a child? Or is questioning not a very sound observational method? Is a line of questioning like that in the previous paragraph an attempt to categorise, formulate and hypothesise about a process which is fundamentally open, dynamic and ambiguous? Should we (or rather, should I *as a grandfather*)

Stephen Rowland

not rather engage with the poetry of childhood than the science of cognitive development?

In the end, all such questioning, and the underlying fascination, concerns being a grandfather. Unlike when I was a parent, grandparenting offers me ample time to reflect on my grandchildren.

Michael, I wonder what we would have thought, that time nearly forty years ago, if it had occurred to us that our work together would inspire me as a grandparent.

With so many thanks for that.

And love

Stephen

After his release from the Army as a conscientious objector, **STEPHEN ROWLAND** taught in primary schools (1972-85) and universities (1985-2013), including University College London, of which he is Emeritus Professor of Higher Education. His educational research has focused on the nature of educational enquiry and his books include *The Enquiring Classroom* and *The Enquiring University*. Now happily retired in the Derbyshire Peak District, he enjoys his grandchildren and grand piano.

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