

Sounds of the Trees



My grade four music class has been engaging in various Indigenous ways of learning and knowing. During a school-wide Indigenous presentation with a local Elder of our community, we were encouraged to engage in the sounds of nature and listen to what they had to say. In response to this, we have decided to take the morning to head outside and discover the many sounds of the trees. Recently, our class has been working on exploring and composing soundscapes. We gather some supplies to assist us in creating our soundscapes (crayons, markers and paper), and head outside. Once we arrive at the forest, the students are split into groups of four and are invited to listen to and follow the sounds of the trees.

After the students' initial explorations, I notice that Juan, Elizabeth, Reid and Marcella appear to need some help. I walk over to offer some guidance and support in their soundscape creations.

I ask, "How is your soundscape coming along?"

"We don't have a lot done yet," Reid says, in a defeated tone.

"Yeah, we are kinda stuck and don't know what to do next," Juan adds.

Hoping to gauge their progress, I ask, "Why don't you show me what you have so far?"

The group shows me their soundscape composition by presenting the series of sounds they have found, one at a time. Marcella begins with making whistling noises, then Juan chimes in with ‘whooshing’ sounds, and Reid and Elizabeth rub their hands together.

“And that’s all we have,” says Juan.

“It sounds like you have a great start to your soundscape, and I especially like the whistling and whooshing noises. What do they represent?”

“Well, we wanted to make sounds like the wind blowing between the leaves and branches of the trees, because it’s a bit windy today,” says Marcella.

“Yeah, and when we thought about the sounds that the wind makes, we thought of whistling,” continues Elizabeth.

“I wonder if you can think about what sounds, other than the wind, might be present all the way from the bottom of the tree to the top. Listen closely to the sounds beneath the earth, in the tree roots, along the grass, around the tree trunk, the bark, the branches, and the sky and clouds above it. What sorts of sounds come to mind now? Are they loud, soft, fast, slow?”

“Oh! There are birds chirping in the background! Do you hear them?” exclaims Elizabeth.

“Yeah, I do! I never noticed those sounds before. All I heard was the wind,” states Juan.

“Me too,” says Reid.

I add, “I want you to continue to listen very closely to these various different sounds. It may help if you close your eyes to focus your senses on the sounds and not the sights. Write down what you hear and describe it. This will help you discover new sounds to use in your soundscapes. Does that make sense and help a bit?”

Marcella acknowledges with a head nod and responds, “Yes, it helps a lot. Thanks so much, Ms. Kuepfer!”

The rest of the group yells out, “Thank you!”

Later in the lesson, I go back to check in on Juan, Elizabeth, Reid and Marcella. I ask the group to show me what else they have come up with. To my delight, the group has created an array of sounds using various parts of their bodies, as well as sticks, twigs, bark, and stones they have gathered nearby! After their performance, I congratulate the group on their efforts with a round-of-applause and a big “Bravo”!

“You have composed such a wonderful soundscape full of so many different sounds and textures. You even used some elements of nature, like the twigs and stones. I also heard the use of dynamics in your soundscape. Well done!”

“Thanks! It wasn’t so hard once we spent some more time listening,” says Elizabeth.

“Like really listening. There are so many sounds out here! And then Reid had the idea to use some sticks he found, and then I gathered some stones. It just kinda grew from there,” explains Juan.

“Well thank you for sharing today!”

“I was very impressed with Juan, Elizabeth, Reid and Marcella’s progress today, despite the initial challenges they experienced. They demonstrated a great deal of perseverance, active listening, and creativity in today’s lesson, and I am looking forward to seeing which directions their future soundscape compositions will go after our conversation. Today, this group showed me their ability to deeply analyze the sounds around them by going beyond the superficial sounds. Juan, Elizabeth, Reid and Marcella are all able to represent various aspects of nature (i.e., a tree) through profound, thoughtful, and intentional sounds, and they composed a meaningful, musical soundscape accordingly. In the coming classes, I will propose that Juan, Elizabeth, Reid and Marcella continue to explore the sounds around them and search for the sounds that go beyond this particular tree and encourage them to seek out new contexts for soundscape creation.”