

Windows into Children's Thinking



From the principal



They offer children the opportunity to realize that their ideas are different and not coinciding with the ideas of others, and therefore they discover that they hold their own ideas and unique point of view. ”

Loris Malaguzzi



The Reggio Emilia approach credits each individual child with an extraordinary wealth of inborn abilities and potential, and with strength and creativity. The dedicated teachers in our Early Learning Centre facilitate the development of these attributes. An important way in which this is achieved is by encouraging cooperation amongst children. Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio approach, explains what it means for a group to work together:

“They offer children the opportunity to realize that their ideas are different and not coinciding with the ideas of others, and therefore they discover that they hold their own ideas and unique point of view.

The children realize that the world is multiple and that other children can be discovered by negotiation of ideas. Instead of interacting only through feelings and a sense of friendship, they discover how satisfying it is to exchange ideas and thereby transform their environment.”

This journal offers an insight into the possibilities created when our children learn together, sharing the childhood emotions of happiness, wonder, angst and resilience. The process of documenting the children’s daily experiences and ongoing projects gives meaning and identity to all that they do. It allows us to marvel at the profound thoughts and deep understandings of our children.

As you explore the pages of this journal, allow yourself to once again see the world through the lens of a child. In doing so, you will be struck by the wonder that children see in everyday occurrences, and by their ability to solve problems. Seen through this lens, the future is bright and hopeful. Our role, is to equip our children with the grounding to make it so, and that is what we strive to do as the children journey through the Early Learning Centre.

Joseph Gerassi

From the Head of the Early Learning Centre

“

Children can give us the strength of doubt and the courage of error. They can transmit to us the joy of searching and researching...the value of research, as an openness toward others and toward everything new that is produced by the encounter with others.”

Carla Rinaldi 2003



In schools, the word research often means the gathering of a collection of information, to compile what is already known about a certain topic. For us, experiences and emotions that characterise 'Scientific' research...such as curiosity, the unknown, marvelling, amazement, doubt, error, crisis, theory and confusion...are part of our everyday working at school.

Carla Rinaldi proposes the concept of "the normality of research" which defines research as an attitude and an approach to everyday living in schools and in life...as a way of thinking for ourselves and thinking with others, a way of relating with others, with the world around us and with life.

Four years ago, we, in the E.L.C. started our own research journal. The articles were not investigations in their entirety but rather small vignettes, part of the process, from each level as well as cross class groups. One investigation may have spanned a few weeks, whilst another may have continued over many months and may still be ongoing. Each investigation is documented through the recording of discussions and reflections by the children and their teachers, through photographs and other 'languages' This documentation is fundamental to our work with our children. It makes their thinking, often very complex, visible and open to evaluation and interpretation.

"The deeper the knowledge and culture of a language, the more listening and interpretation are possible. The more attentively a language allows us to communicate process rather than results, the more capable it is of giving freedom and diversification to children's actions. This requires of us an enormous capacity to listen." Vea Vecchi

This documentation also makes visible the teachers' research and reflections alongside those of the children. These investigations are authentic and purposeful. Working together with groups of teachers allows for multiple perspectives and different interpretations. The documentation reflects the many languages the children use as they describe their theories and make sense of their world i.e. the written, spoken expressive and digital language.

The children's words are all italicised and many of the articles are prefaced by their own (children's) words.

"When you make learning visible, you make it exist, real, shareable, the starting point for democracy" Carla Rinaldi

Daphne Gaddie .

Daphne Gaddie



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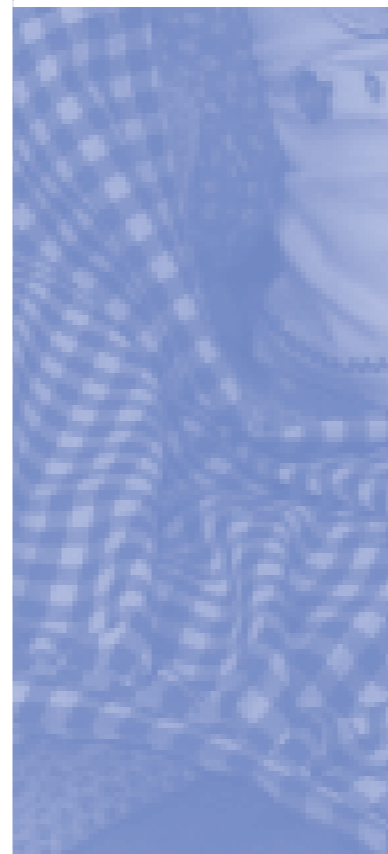
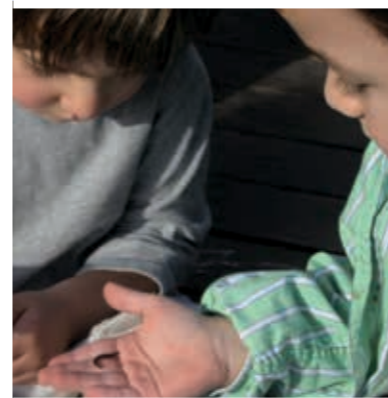
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3 Year Old Kinder

He's hiding because he wants to go home...

“Early childhood is often described as a unique and critical time for connecting children with nature (Wilson, 1006; Carson, 1998 originally published in 1956; Tilbury 1994). Nature connections made in early childhood are instrumental to the construction of values, development of an ‘ecological self’, and can be viewed as a lifelong resource. But, under what circumstances do these connections materialise?”¹ (Elliot et al, 2008, p 10)



We made a decision to prioritise sustainable education this year in our kindergarten. Sustainability is a term with more than 300 definitions (Source: Griffith University) and we wondered how we could introduce such a large concept to young children in a meaningful and authentic way.

After much research, discussion and deliberation we decided that developing an authentic connection to the earth and nature was the right place to begin.

“If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it.”²

Our hypotheses were developed.

Do connections with nature materialise or are they built?

How can we make sure that we introduce sustainable concepts to children in an authentic way?

What can we, as educators, do to foster children’s natural curiosity about their world?

How do we measure a ‘connection’ to the natural world? And, where do we start?

In February Victoria experienced the worst natural disaster in its history. Bushfires ravaged our state, killing at least 173 people, countless native and farm animals and destroying wildlife habitat. We wondered what the children coming to kindergarten in the weeks after the bushfire knew about this tragedy and how it had affected them.

In February, Israel celebrates Tu Bishvat, the ‘New Year of the Trees.’ At Bialik College we celebrate this minor Jewish Festival by planting trees. This year in our kindergarten we planned to discuss why trees are important to us and the birds and animals.

With these two events in mind we created a provocation with animals (both native and domestic), some branches, pine cones and natural wooden blocks for the children to investigate. The children immediately began making *homes for the animals*. (Fig 1)

One child explained that his construction was a church for the animals *so they don’t catch on fire*. He described the dead animals he had seen on the TV and that they had been burnt, he described how people had evacuated with their animals to towns and stayed in churches. The church,



he told us, would shelter the animals *until the fire goes away*. (Fig 2)

We also made a commitment to spending as much time outdoors each day as we did indoors, ensuring that children had time to explore the outdoor environment, tend the gardens and develop a relationship with the outdoor environment at kindergarten.

We noticed children discovering the many millipedes that lived in our dry garden beds. At the time, these tiny black millipedes seemed to be the only living creatures in our garden. As each millipede was discovered it was quickly killed by the children, this was accompanied by squeals of fear, and worse, delight at the fate of the tiny creatures.

David Attenborough once said that **“People are not going to care about animal conservation unless they think that animals are worthwhile.”³**

Our question of where to start teaching the children about sustainability was answered. We wanted to foster a sense of responsibility in the children for the creatures and create a place for them to live – a habitat. To do this we had to find a way to connect the children with the plants and animals in our kinder garden.

As millipedes were discovered we encouraged the children to handle them gently, to put them in the garden and be careful of the precious creatures. We discussed what they looked like, where they lived and that they must be scared when we pick them up. We noticed that as we showed our concern for the creatures’ welfare many children soon became less fearful of them and became the millipedes’ advocates.

As the weather cooled and the millipede discoveries became less frequent we decided to further the children’s interest in tiny creatures and introduced a worm farm to the children. We wanted the worms to be cared for by the children and fed using fruit scraps from our morning tea. Our intention was that the children would be responsible for the welfare of the worms.

We watched the worms and talked about how they lived. The box of worms that we had been given as our ‘starter kit’ had many young worms in it. The children immediately referred to these tiny worms as ‘babies.’

The children were encouraged to look at and carefully hold the worms. Some children held them willingly; others looked on from a distance. Some showed no interest at all in the worms. (Fig 3)

The children had many questions and theories about the worms.

What do they eat? Where do they sleep? Why do you put the lid on? They are hiding. They are the mums and dads. That is the baby and the cousins.

The care of the worms became part of our daily gardening routine. Each day we go outside to check on the worms, see what they have eaten, remove the uneaten fruit and look to see how many worms we can find and how big they are. We tend our vegetables and herbs and pick flowers from the flower garden for vases and sandpit play.

One morning in May a child discovered a creature while digging in the vegetable garden. He brought it inside to show us *Karen, look a worm. It has to go in the house*. (Fig 4)

Other children quickly came to investigate and study the creature. Legs were discovered and one of the children announced it was not a worm but a millipede.

To test this theory, the creature was placed in a viewing container and then worms were carefully removed from the worm farm for the children to compare to this interesting creature. The children observed and drew the creatures. (Fig 5, 6 & 7) Although we asked the children to compare the creatures we found their interest was not in their features but the worms’ feelings and needs.



“The magic of imagination is one of the cornerstones of childhood play”¹ ...

“

“To the very young child play isn’t just like life, it is life...fantasy in play expands consciousness, no longer limiting children to what is real, but allowing them to imagine what is possible and what is impossible.”² ”

I can see he’s smiling
He’s happy? He’s grumpy?
He’s whole family are grumpy. They are worried about him.
He’s hiding from the sun because they don’t like the sun.
They only like the dark.
He’s hiding because he wants to go home. To see their Mum and Dad.
He’s missing he’s Mum and Dad. He’s crying.

The children all agreed the creatures wanted to go home and they should be released immediately to their homes. The worms were carefully returned to the worm farm (Fig 8) and gently covered with compost *so it’s not scared of the sun anymore* and the millipede to the garden where there is *lots to eat*.

The time we spend in our garden each day enables the children to slowly observe, interact with and enjoy the natural world they live in. All year we have promoted the welfare of plants, encouraging the children not to hurt the plants, to water and tend to the gardens with the teachers.

The children have learnt how to make daisy chains and have created sculpture, feasts and play-scapes using the plants, logs, leaves and flowers in our garden. (Fig 9) The children always check to ensure there are enough flowers left for the bees before they pick flowers from the daisy bushes.

As a result we have noticed a dramatic decline in the number of broken plants from ball play and the children rarely walk through the garden beds anymore.

The children appear to have humanised the creatures that live in our garden. The children, by giving the worms and millipedes personalities, feelings and

even family structure, have developed empathy for the creatures and care about what happens to them. The children hold the worms with gloves instead of bare hands *because they don’t like it and might get sick* and uncover the worms only briefly to check on them so they don’t get too much sun.

The children seem to project their own thoughts and feelings on to the animals and by doing this seem to be conveying what is deeply important to them, the importance of family, feeling safe, and a sense of belonging.

The children are beginning to develop an understanding that the tiny creatures in our world need a home to live in, food to eat and shelter and that we can create a safer place for them to live; that we as humans have a responsibility to care for the creatures on our planet.

The children have developed a connection with the tiny bugs that live in our garden and therefore a connection with nature that will, we hope, be the foundation of a lifelong love of the natural world.

As we look forward, we plan to consolidate the children’s understandings of the life-cycles of creatures and place more emphasis on creating a habitat for native creatures in our own backyard.

References:

- 1 Edited by Sue Elliot . *The outdoor playspace naturally for children birth to five years*. 2008 Pademelon Press, N.S.W, 2154
- 2 David Sobel. *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education* by https://webmail.bialik.vic.edu.au/exchweb/bin/redirect.asp?URL=http://www.haven.net/deep_council/sobel2.htm
- 3 thinkexist.com/quotes/david_attenborough/4.html



As teachers, observing the children in the home corner, the dress up corner, the block corner, at the table with recycled materials, in the sandpit, out in the garden – we see that the list of areas where imaginative play occurs in the kinder environment is endless. Children will create their fantasies wherever and whenever the need arises. We have seen that environment does not dictate imaginative play – it can happen anywhere in the kinder environment, indoors and outdoors.

We were interested in the young children’s imagination and posed the following questions:

Do the children model parent behaviours or do they modify them?

How and why do they imitate their siblings?

Does their imaginative play reflect their home life in the way they understand it?

The value of imagination is making a connection with their lives from real to imaginary, not just about facts or acquisition of skills.

“From the earliest ‘pretend I’m the mama and you’re the baby’ play is the model for the life long practice of trying out new ideas.” (Vivian Gussin Paley)³

I, the daddy

There are three mummies

We need to put the babies to sleep

(Pointing to girls) – mum, mum, mum

(Pointing to boys) – dad, dad, dad

These are my two babies

Bella, what I am

You’re the sister

No

What you want to be then?

Mum

You can’t, there are three mummies! (Fig 1)

Through imagination children can develop and apply their theories. The two girls were discussing the clothing for their doll and decided it was a girl’s dress, *if it’s got flowers it’s a girls*. They see a piece of material with a floral design and they connect that to femininity. (Fig 2) **“The proposition put forth by a group of three year olds that gender identity is a function of clothing”** (Rebecca S. New in the *Hundred Languages*)⁴

Children also have this wonderful ability to manipulate situations that cause them anxiety. Imagination can act as a safety valve when they need it...

If people come to our house and take our babies then we’ll smack them, hey! No, I don’t think they will do that. They will just look in the windows.

Children use their imagination to help them understand issues and solve problems, how to negotiate, how to take responsibility for their own decisions – all necessary life skills ...

I want to play.

No, we only need three people.

But I want to.

Ok, you can be the dad.

You can be the brother. (Fig 3, 4)

“As we look forward, we plan to consolidate the children’s understandings of the life-cycles of creatures and place more emphasis on creating a habitat for native creatures in our own backyard.”

The children's play reflects the way they live. In a sense they are trying to create their own reality. They mimic what they think is realistic life.

We see how home and family scenarios are replayed over and over again...

*I'm the big brother, no you're the baby
I have to go to work, I'll be back soon.
Mum and dad will look after you
I'm back, I had a great time.
Mum, baby needs help
No, he's not a baby anymore, he's a big boy* (Fig 5, 6)

As Vivian Gussin Paley says, "the business of young children is to pretend"⁵

*I'm getting married, and her going to be married.
Can there be fairies in Halloween?
Ollie, come in the car, we're going to Halloween
We're going on a big bumpy drive!* (Fig 7, 8)

Imaginative play makes use of whatever materials the children find in their environment. A group of children were playing in the block corner and were making a cake using corks, cardboard tubes and plastic rings. The previous day these very same items were used in a building construction together with the blocks. In this way the children feel free to decide how they will use the materials in a symbolic way. There are no right or wrong ways to use these materials – they can be the ingredients for a cake or the decorations on the block construction. Topal and Gandini feel that "Children possess a natural openness to the potential of materials. The goal is to allow children to become fluent with materials – as if materials were a language."⁶ (Fig 9, 10)

As the year progresses and the children move into upper kinder next year, it will be interesting to see if and how their imaginative play will change. Will they continue to be pre-occupied with situations that relate to immediate family and their home or will they venture further a field?

We will need to give the children opportunities to revisit more than once, as we would do as adults. This will give them the chance to apply their theories. We are not looking for a product but allowing children to let their imagination operate freely. We continually question ourselves as to the authenticity of experiences we offer, however young the children are.

References:

- 1 Angela Rossmannith. 1997 *When Will the Children Play?* P. 14. P.199
- 2 & 4 *The Hundred Languages of Children.* 1998 P. 273
- 3, 5 & 6 Vivian Gussin Paley. *A Child's Work* P.33 P.92 P.99
- 7 Topal and Gandini. 1999 *Beautiful Stuff – Introduction*



I am somebody...



To give oneself an identity is a long and tiring process. It is like being born a second time. It is the need of each one of us to give ourselves a face, a body, gestures, actions, thoughts words and imagination. It is the sentiment of being that distinguishes us from others, in order to recognise and be recognised, to recognise ourselves in others and in others to find a part of ourselves. It is in fact a dialogue, confrontation and discussion with the other ways of being and thinking, that the image of oneself takes on awareness and defines itself. ” Loris Malaguzzi¹

At the beginning of 2009 we discussed the concept of identity whilst looking through the names of the children who were about to start kindergarten. "Who were we" and "What our identity was." We felt that it would be important to establish a group and then that group of children would be able to discover a collective identity for themselves.

We all attend the same school for many different reasons, as written by one parent;

"...As a graduate of Bialik...I decided to do some research and found out that Chaim Nachman Bialik was a proponent of a secular Hebrew speaking education system in Europe, and he was also a staunch Zionist."

The focus on Israel and Hebrew in the school curriculum is actually the primary foundations upon which the school is based.

These tenets of course affect our identity – if we see ourselves as advocates for the school, then we are taking on Bialik's principles, particularly a love of Hebrew and Israel.

She goes on to say that her daughter is 3. "She knows she is Jewish... she is in the process of discovering who she is, but cannot articulate this in the narrative form, but if asked a specific question she can answer it. Identity is not something that stops evolving...it is an ever changing dynamic process – one that I hope will pose many challenges to my daughter over time.

However, for the next little while, the foundations upon which that identity will be based are being built at Bialik. It is in these formative years, whether they understand it or not, that our children's identities are being formulated. That is why it is so important to understand the identity of the school as context in which to assist our children on the process of self-awareness."

Our school Bialik College is named after the poet Chaim Nachman Bialik. He wrote *Lamitnadvim Ba'am* (Volunteers of the Nation) in 1900 in Odessa after the second Zionist Congress. In the first line of his poem he makes an impassioned call to the younger generation to step forth with courage and rebuild the land of Israel.

Our school motto is "Step Forth With Courage" and it is important to share ones' roots, heritage and identity but at the same time to celebrate and acknowledge our unique identities and the commonalities we all share.

We sent a letter to all the parents explaining that we were going to ask some of the children the question "who are you" and "what can you tell me about yourself", and asked them for their participation by asking their children similar questions.

At the same time we sat with small groups of children and posed the question "Who are you?"

Many of the responses were very literal such as:

I am a boy. I am Beau. I've got hair and a nose and a mouth, a t-shirt and a neck. My chin.

*I look like my mummy. I am Georgie Porgie.
I like to do drawing or princesses or Cinderella or Snow White.*

When I asked the question...can you tell me something special about Georgia she replied by saying, *I don't know about her. My mummy knows that. She bees angry with me sometimes. I'm not a boy, I'm a girl.*

*I am Eden Grace Ruben.
My name is Spiderman. No, my name is Princess Eden.
I am just beautiful. I am, because mummy says I can.*

*I start with "S" and I get a lot of things on my birthday. I talk different to other people. I can't tell what kind of person I am because I don't know.
I think I am special because I give my mum and dad lots of kisses.
I am a caring person – I sing my Phoebe, my baby, songs when she cries.
I am an artist. I just paint, paint, paint.
I play nicely – because I do!*

It takes skill and practice to be able to lead a productive conversation with young children – and this experience ought to be over an extended period of time.

I then understood what Socrates meant when he said..."the only true knowledge is to acknowledge that you know nothing..."² This was not entirely the case but I felt myself floundering, mainly because I was not sure of how to ask the question!

“Children's thoughts run, flow, crawl and fly into every corner of the classroom, marking out a pathway to learning”.
Vivian Gussin Paley⁷

We were determined to continue on this path of identity, because we knew that the young child's thoughts are continually evolving.

We wanted to pursue the notion of what it is to be somebody – what are our names, why do we have names and where do we belong. Another question we kept on asking ourselves was how could we make the children's thinking visible?

I then remembered a poem I had read, written by our music teacher Jocelyn Lowinger.³

HIDING

Can you see me?

I'm looking from this face.

But inside I have shifted to another place.

We could see the children's faces. We were able to identify a sense of self but what was that child really like?

A sense of self has to develop gradually. Being yourself is about knowing who you are. Fortunately time is a component that will play a huge role in the path of this investigation that we have chosen.

In order to include the many strands of this investigation the use of a web made our thinking visible. Using this web we could organise our thoughts together, but I knew that this was only an outline as dialogue and discussion can take us down many different and diverse paths. (Fig 1)



Fig 1

As the parents are part of this ongoing investigation I have received e-mails from parents who have been also trying to discover the notion of identity. The following is a conversation recorded by a mum.

Mum: Lindsay told me you are learning about identity at kinder

Oliver: What is identity?

Mum: It is who you are, what makes you, you...

Oliver: I know who I am. I'm Oliver John Sormann

Mum: And your middle name is after my dad John who died.

Oliver: How did he die?

Mum: He got very sick, But he is always around and looking out for you even if you can't see him

Oliver: That is very sad. Are you sad? I wish I could meet him.

Mum: Me too. You know part of your identity is that you are Jewish.

Oliver: I'm not Jewish

Mum: Yes you are. So are nonna and peppe and Omi

Oliver: Oh

Mum: And you go to a Jewish School – Bialik.

Children explore identities through make believe and stories.

Aiden: I'm getting married because I am wearing my bowtie

Toby: Who are you going to marry?

Aiden: My mummy.

Toby: You can't be married if you are not a dad.

Aiden: I AM A DAD!!!

Toby: You come to kinder, so you can't be a dad. So then you must go to work.

Pippa: Dad's go to work not kinder.

Toby: So Aiden must go to work, but he can't because he's not a dad.

He has to be big like a dad.

Aiden: I AM A DAD!!!!

Cara: if you get a baby from dads' tummy then it gets born.

Ali: Dads do not come home until night time, if they have a long meeting.

But it is the morning and Aiden does not need to go to work.

Is putting yourself into someone else's shoes a good way of trying out feelings and exploring new or different behaviours.

If you do that to me again I will be very grumpy, but if you "beed" nice to me then we can be friends.

Does the sense of belonging among our family and friends and community provide a strong sense of who we are.

Amalia: Mum, whose kid are you.

Mum: I'm Safu and Zeida's kid.

Amalia: But you can't be. You're an adult.

Mum: But I am still their child.

Amalia: mmmmm

Mum: Once I was little just like you and I lived with my mum and dad and my brother in our house just like you live with your mum and dad and your sister in our house now.

Amalia: But then you left that family and now you are part of our family.

Mum: I will always be part of my family – the family I grew up with, my mum and dad and brother just like when you grow up you will still be part of this family even when you are married and have babies of your own.

Michelle: Can dada come to mama's birthday

Nana: Of course he can

Michelle: Is it because he is mama's friend

Nana: He is mama's friend but he is also her husband

Michelle: No they are granddaughters

Nana: You are a granddaughter. You are my granddaughter, as well as a granddaughter to three other grandparents.

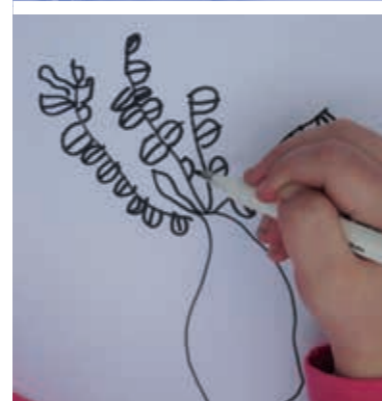
Michelle: No, I am not a granddaughter, I am a sister.

The individual identity is important as well as the collective identity. And as Tom Hall a photographer so aptly says "...as a young person in today's modern society your identity and beliefs need to be adaptable to survive."⁴

Michael Wood a BBC Reporter says "that identity is never static and is always in the making and never made."⁵

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- 3 Jocelyn Lowinger – Where words fall. Publisher Lee Stupart PO Box 976 WA Australia
- 4 Tom Hall. Photographer. Zine "Trouble" Published by Newstead Press.
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4 Year Old Kinder

The sky is for all of us in one world...

“ The changing sky offers the viewer daily opportunities to forecast, “What will the day bring?” “Will it be the same as yesterday or tomorrow?” ”



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

The changing sky offers the viewer daily opportunities to forecast, “What will the day bring?” “Will it be the same as yesterday or tomorrow? Of course, we know sky changes very quickly. As we struggle to accommodate these changes, we could also use this as a metaphor of how one perceives change from the literal to the deeper changes in our thought processes.

In a classroom of younger children they are asked, “What will the weather be today?” “What is the season?” “How can we tell?” “How long will it last?” “What is the month?”

Often the responses to these questions are predictable and based on memorized factual knowledge.

The bigger questions one might pose could be: “How large is the sky?” “Who else shares it with us?” “Can we imagine that everyone has sky?” “If we all have sky how do we accommodate differences in cultures, traditions and diversity of thinking”.

Within our school, our focus on the concept of communities within communities is always there, always offering new and authentic learning experiences to engage in, seeking new strategies, problem solving, refocusing or changing one’s opinions and thinking. Change as a concept is always present. Each group of children will move to another classroom and year level. For our centre, the class group stays together for two years but “move” on to a new classroom with their teachers. A new perspective. A rite of passage. In February, the children were asked how they felt they had changed, now that they had returned for the new year. Attention to their physical features was their initial response. The children explored their new physical environments both inside and outside the classroom. We encouraged the children to use a range of materials to reflect on what they had seen and what their thoughts were. We wanted the children to see themselves as researchers and part of this involved making decisions about what materials they thought would serve their purpose to either plan or develop their ideas. Clay was used to express how they perceived themselves now they were in Kinder 4. Some of the children chose to use the clay to construct an image of themselves including their whole body. Others explored the technical aspects of this construction for example how would their model stand up or would it? (Fig1)

Then followed their conversations about age. The children pondered questions such as: “Could you do more now that you are older?” “Do you



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

understand more now that you are older?” “Did you use to have the same thoughts but the way you expressed them were not understood when you were younger?” As one student suggested, *you grow until you become an adult, a mum, dad, grandpa or grandma.* The children thought about this and one student said *you still grow.* He pointed to his head and said *your thinking grows in your brain. When you are one you might scribble, when you are two you learn more, when you are three you know more, when you are four you know more and more and when you are five you keep learning and knowing more.’*

One child had canvassed the questions as to *what did the brain look like? Has anyone seen it?*

It looks like this said one child as held his hands clenched together. Another child began creating a circular wall and gestured that *the thoughts would go in there with a slide to go in and a slide for thoughts to go out.* Some children used clay and others used paint to create the image of *where one’s thoughts went, changed and developed.* (Fig 2&3)

Another child thought for a moment and claimed that *inside the head would be too small for all the thinking.* Therefore he presented a theory that *thoughts fall out of the brain to make room for new thoughts.* Another asked, *Does it hurt? No,* replied the child. *Your thoughts are invisible.* Another child thought for a while and then asked, *Can your brain fall out too? No, your brain is inside your head!* When a child painted a foot, he shared his intent as to how this foot created thinking. *Your brain tells your feet what to do and where to go.* (Fig4)

The concept of change can often be perceived as ‘differences’ and for some, change might be perceived with anxiety or negativity. Rather, we directed the focus on what were the similarities and commonalities and where change was an experience, that each could contribute to, to benefit from, rather than be negatively perceived. When the group can experience and problem solve together it benefits the individual as part of the group.

Earlier this year I viewed an exhibition at the NGV entitled ‘A Shared Sky’ which focused on the exploration of sky, space, planets and constellations and the changing theories as a result of new technologies. The exhibition also explored the symbolic meaning of the sky in different stories within different cultures. After viewing this exhibition, I decided to use a provocation for the children, the common subject ‘the sky’, as part of their regular discussions about the weather and the seasons in kinder. In this instance, I sought to direct their focus to the sky as an opportunity to acknowledge the similarities of change that we all experience as we observe the sky from different parts of the world. Therefore, change became a concept that they perceived they had in common with each other as opposed to thinking about change as ‘differences’. It offered another opportunity in this investigation, to engage the children’s interest in the sky, space and the world. ‘Under a shared sky’ the children observed the sky at different times of the day using binoculars. They recorded their observations using digital cameras.(Fig 5) They also documented their observations through paintings where they depicted a sky at a particular time of day or season. (Fig 6)



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12

From here, I discussed their idea with my colleagues. Although the children had individually documented their observations and understandings of the “changing sky”, we once again decided look at the shared understandings of change, the commonalities. This led to the painting of a series of large canvases by groups of children to represent the many views and thoughts encountered and encompassed about the sky as the culmination of this investigation. (Fig 9, 10, 11, 12 & 13)

These paintings will now be suspended from the tall ceilings outside of the kinder classrooms under the direction of the children. They will be viewed by the children and their families and as part of our history within the school. (Fig 14, 15, 16, 17 & 18)

From this focus, we hope that we have heightened in the children’s and our awareness opportunities when approaching change.



Fig. 14

The children posed statements and questions such as:

How old is the sky? How big is it? Does the sky look the same at your house as it does at mine? Why does the sky get dark if you go into space?

What is the sky made out of? The sky looks different in Greece. The sky is infinity.

Their small painted depictions of the sky were shared and the children held them above their heads in the same way that they observed different “pieces” of the sky outside.

One child related a story of her families’ trip to the farm.

When we go home, my dad stops the car and takes a photo of the sunset. (Fig 7&8)

Other experiences were shared;

I like the stormy sky because you stay inside.

I saw the sky in Israel.

I went to America.

What was the sky like there?

I didn’t look up.

This response reminds us of how although we might think we share the same understandings each in fact bring a different angle and response. Several children expressed the desire to recreate a sky that represented all of their observations *for all of the kinder 4’s*. They suggested this should be outside the area of their classrooms. *There will be sky outside and inside. The sky is for all of us in one world.*



Fig. 13



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

Fig 14: *You need a rainbow*

I like the storm too. That's when we can stay inside!

But you need a rainbow

That tells you that the sky is changing

Fig 15: *The sky can change different colours. We do not know what colour it will be?*

When the clouds move there is the sun. There is only one sun.

Fig 16: *The nighttime sky, light dark light, the sun goes down in the mountains.*

Fig 17: *That is the sunset. The sun goes pink and the clouds come together moving.*

When the sun goes down there is a little bit of red. The red comes from the sun.

Fig 18: *The foggy sky when the sky looks like its divided in the middle is light and then different grey everywhere.*



Fig. 17

“

A group of children reminds us;
The sky is for all of us in one world.
The world is earth.
The world is one.
The sky just goes around the whole world.
The world is in space.
 Forever ”



Fig. 18

It's empty. Maybe it's waiting for something to grow in it? No, stuff can't grow by itself...

“

An exploration of the four elements-humans, the land, plants and animals and their inter relatedness is vital to feeling connected to the natural world. If humans feel separated from nature they are less likely to appreciate, respect and therefore care for the natural systems that sustain us.” (Elliot, S, 2008, Page 45)

”

The children in our four-year-old group had already been with us for a year. When we moved with them to four-year-old kindergarten, we looked forward to the possibilities of new encounters in a different room and outdoor environment.

Through our research about the benefits of providing many different opportunities for learning outside, we were eager to encourage the children to be involved in sustained and meaningful outdoor play.

Our intent was to encourage the children to develop a relationship with the plants, animals and spaces in our playground. We also wanted the children to recognise the reciprocity of these relationships and how the plants, animals and people needed each other to survive.

We reflected on our past experiences and posed the following questions.

What did the children enjoy doing outdoors?

Were there spaces that lent themselves to the possibilities of learning about plants and or animals?

What kind of spaces interested the children and sustained their play?

What benefits were the children gaining from these spaces?

How could we support children in learning from their experiences outdoors?

The children discussed their thoughts.

I like looking at the different plants and smelling the flowers.

The mud is good. You can dig and get dirty hands.

There are worms (centipedes) in the mud you know. We can pick them up.

The plants need us to water them otherwise they will die.

There are birds in the big trees at the back but not in the little plants in our playground.

“If children are going to look after the world they live in they first need to be aware of it, to come to admire it and ultimately to care for it.”²² (Warden, C, 2002, Page 7)

After listening to the children and reflecting on their views, and our observations, we developed further questions.

Would the children have a stronger relationship with the outdoor space by caring for it?

Could we encourage the children to be more aware of the needs of plants and their importance, when given responsibility for their own plants?

Would the children recognise the importance of their role in nurturing



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

plants and vice versa?

We decided that we wanted to further the idea about growth and change by using the growth of a plant as an analogy to the children's growth. Our intentions were for each child to bring a special plant on the day of his/her birthday celebration. The birthday child and some of his classmates would then plant the plant.

Together with the children we researched the types of plants that might be suitable to bring to the kindergarten environment. We looked at gardening books and spoke to people who were knowledgeable about various plants.

The children were very aware of the drought and so we discussed choosing a plant that did not require much water. Through our research we decided that cactus plants would be a good choice.

As each child celebrated their birthday in our room, the children who had celebrated previously would check on their plants. This involved measuring the height of the plant to see if it had grown, looking at the state of the leaves and flowers, and commenting on any other changes they observed.

I like flowers but not everybody does. Maybe we could bring a flower if we like flowers, a herb plant if we like cooking, or something that looks pretty to us.

Maybe when we have our plant for a little while, like when my birthday has past and it is someone else's turn, we can look and see how big our plant is and if it's grown a little or a lot.

My plant has grown since my birthday. It used to go only up to here, but now it reaches up to here. That's more. (Fig 1 & 2)



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

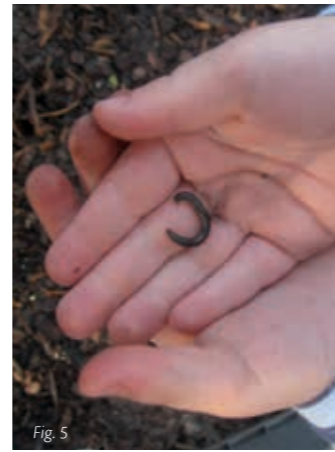


Fig. 5

During one of our morning meetings, one of the children questioned a square plot of soil in our garden.

*It's empty. Maybe it's waiting for something to grow in it?
No, stuff can't grow by itself. You need to put seeds in.
You can't just put seeds in. You have to look after them like our plants.
You have to give them some water.
Maybe we could grow things that look like pretty flowers...
Or things we could eat like carrots. I love carrots.*

After many discussions with the children, we as a group decided to make the area into a vegetable garden. The idea of growing a vegetable garden also provided an opportunity to develop a sense of responsibility as a result of their actions.

Some children were interested in measuring the plot and researching what plants to use. Others wanted to be involved in the planting of the plants, whilst others wanted to water and care for the plants. (Fig 3 & 4)

*See that shape (the area of the vegetable garden). It's a square shape.
How many feet fit this way?
You have to put one foot in front of the other like this. Then you count them.*

We need marigolds. Marigolds are good because some insects don't like them. Then when the insects come out and they smell the marigolds, they'll go "Yuck!, and then they'll fly away.

The children took their research and questions to a Garden Centre to interview the staff. They shared their experience with the whole class and explained why they had come back with particular plants.

As the children dug in the mud, further experiences were encountered with worms and centipedes (Fig 5). They watched their plants grow and discovered change, and the cycle of life and death. As they tended to their vegetables, they also observed the food chain and who is dependent on whom.

Making connections with the soil and the creatures within it encouraged problem solving and decision making as the children began to understand how their actions affected the animals they were observing. Questions and theories emerged about how the centipedes would survive now that they had been dug out of the soil, what happened when they were picked up and prodded, and what other creatures we would find if we continued to dig elsewhere.

Fig 1: Looking at the plants to assess change and growth

Fig 2: Measuring the plant

Fig 3: Writing down what seeds and plants we want for our vegetable garden

Fig 4: Drawing plants in the vegetable garden

Fig 5: Observing centipedes in the mud patch

References:

- 1 Elliot, S. *The Outdoor Playspace Naturally*, 2008
- 2 Warden C. *The Potential of a Puddle*. 2002
- 3 Warden, C. *Nurture Through nature*. 2007

“Through this investigation the children were developing the values of compassion, respect for others and responsibility for the natural world whilst relating to their outdoor environment. We hoped these dispositions would lead to a life long environmental sensitivity and awareness resulting in motivating and empowering the children to take action.”

“To Listen”...

“To concentrate on hearing something.”
Collins English Dictionary



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

THE LISTENING GOES UP INTO THE AIR

One of the possibilities we often offer to the children is to collaborate with a friend, to negotiate and decide together a way forward on a shared piece of work.

As we have documented these encounters, we have discovered that the greatest difficulty has been for the children to find strategies to really hear each other and so move forward in an agreed and collaborative way.

So we asked ourselves some questions.

What do we mean when we say 'listen'?

What does real listening look like?

How do we support children to understand and develop this most difficult skill?

How many of us as adults really listen with an open mind, a mind ready to accept another point of view or listen that we might change through this exchange.

When we listen to someone we are acknowledging them as an individual, they feel respected and we give them value.

Do we listen with anticipation, curiosity and reciprocity?

What do we mean by these words when applied to listening?

The children were invited to discuss.

What does it mean to listen?

You have to look at the person.

You have to be quiet.'

You can't talk because it makes others sad.

You listen with your whole body.

You look or they don't understand and

you get better at listening.

Be quiet don't talk.

Be patient.

You listen to what the other person is saying.

You look at people so you can hear what they are saying.

Children discussing in small groups. (Fig 1)

We wondered if the children's theories would become clearer not only to us but also to them if they were given the opportunity to draw.

This was not easy; it challenged the children not only in their thinking but also in their ability to communicate with their hands and to then capture the ideas on paper. (Fig 2 & 3)

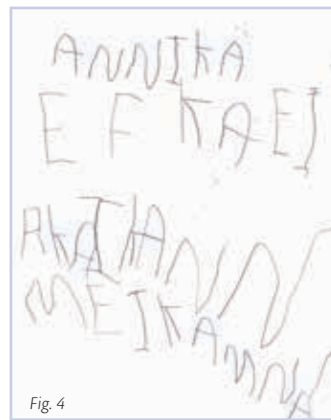


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Many of the children struggled to link their ideas to their drawing and so we wanted to deepen the challenge. We wanted the children to revisit so we returned their drawings and asked them to reflect and then draw again.

We then listened to the children's theories and supported them to make a stronger link between their verbal theory and their drawing.

I wrote it because I didn't get to talk. (Fig 4)

'Can you tell me what it says?'

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO READ YET.

If I give you a piece of paper could you draw your thoughts on listening?

I did flowers because it's a flowery world. She didn't have her hands on her ears. She is standing up and listening to the teacher and lining up. (Fig 5)

This was a baby and this was a home, Then there was a problem and they put it back (Fig 6)

'You said you be quiet When listening, be patient. You have to look at somebody who is talking. Can you draw these ideas now?' (Fig 7)

Through supporting the children to make the connection between their verbal theory and their drawing the children's thoughts hold hands with the pencil and so are strengthened and made visible through the new drawings. We continually try to make learning explicit to the children by bringing them back to their words and the other languages we offer to represent and make clear their ideas, not only to others but more importantly to themselves.

We set high expectations that are negotiated with the children, opportunities to build concentration, persistence, reflection and to engage their imagination and creativity. We are not looking for the right answer, the one way to produce something; we are looking for the process, the strategies and the connections the children use to interpret and understand their research and learning.

YOU HAVE TO LISTEN TO THE TREES ALSO...

After revisiting our conversations on listening we invited the children to explore their ideas about listening through the medium of wire. Wire is not an easy material to get to know; it is stubborn and shyly hides its character. The children can also be stubborn and so they did not give up but negotiated with the wire, so that the children's hands, ideas and the wire began to communicate and got to know each other.

The first ideas emerged....

'I need a lot of wire so the music can go through them, it's like a tube.

If I make a lot of them there will be a lot of music. (Fig 8)

I am making a girl and she is listening. (Fig 9)

I will make the girl that is talking. We can work together. (Fig 10)

Already the children are making visible a deeper understanding of listening. If one is going to listen then there must exist a relationship with something to listen to, someone who is talking, music or even the laughter of a tree.



Fig. 6

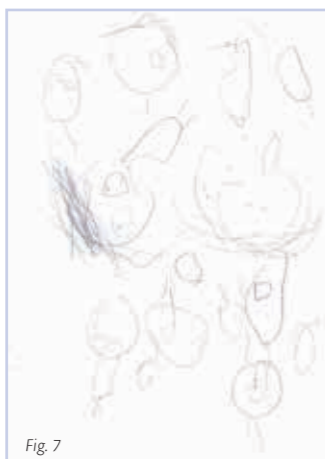


Fig. 7

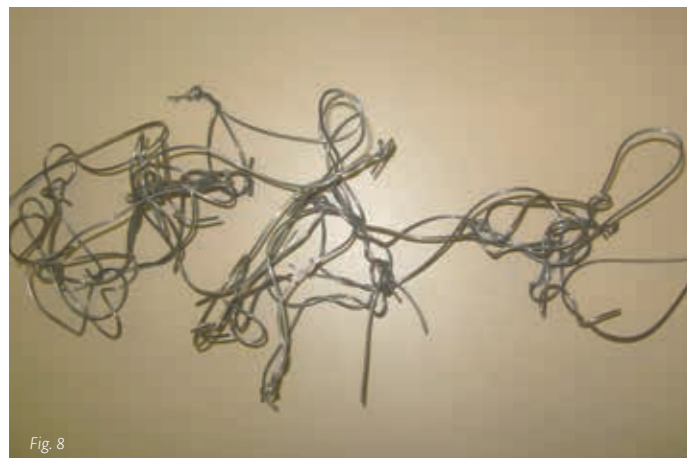


Fig. 8

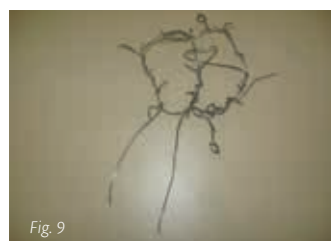


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

You have to listen to the tree also.

The tree likes the rain and when the rain tickles him he might laugh.

We can talk to him and the bird talks to him as well... (Fig 11)

Sometimes the task feels too big and the child becomes overwhelmed and after his initial introduction to the wire he wants to give up, his face droops and his body sags on the stool. *I can't twist it.* It is at this point that the responsibility of the educator is to support the child, to encourage with words or perhaps to lend a skill but all the while with the expectation and commitment that the child will not just walk away from the challenge.

When this is clear to the child and the child does not feel alone, the struggle is overcome and the child is stronger. He takes a chance with the wire and the wire hears him and supports his endeavours and once he begins there is no stopping him and then the adult can step back and smile. Later in the morning when the story is retold and shared with the group, his friends can celebrate with him his persistence and achievement and then the child smiles.

By offering the children wire as an alternative language to drawing we give the children the opportunity to expand and deepen their thinking. This then enables us to be better teachers as we continually modify and create theory and practice.

The wire provoked a different response to drawing, the children made a strong connection between the wire and sound.

When you push down here music comes up and over and over again but different music.

If you press this button the talking goes along the wire all the way and you can listen.

The listening goes all through the pipes – the sounds of the radio.

The sound goes right in around and back and forth..

It's an ear machine, press the button and then it works....

A mouth machine – you press the button and the machine goes...

It's an ear machine – press the button it makes it work

If you press this button the talking goes along all the way and you can listen.

You talk through the phone and then it goes back to me.

One person is on one side and another on the other side and when they ring each other the listening goes from one to the other.

You will notice the idea of a 'machine' has been picked up on several occasions as was the button to press, showing an understanding of how machines work.

More than once the children have made a connection to sound traveling through or along the wire and the wire has been described as pipes or tubes

Perhaps these ideas have been influenced by iPods, telephones and even computers as the children continually observe and make sense of their world.

As educators we can never be sure our interpretations of the children's thinking are right. However it is through analysis of words, drawings, photographs and using other materials such as wire, that we try to understand the learning process and this enables us to learn about and understand deeper how children learn.

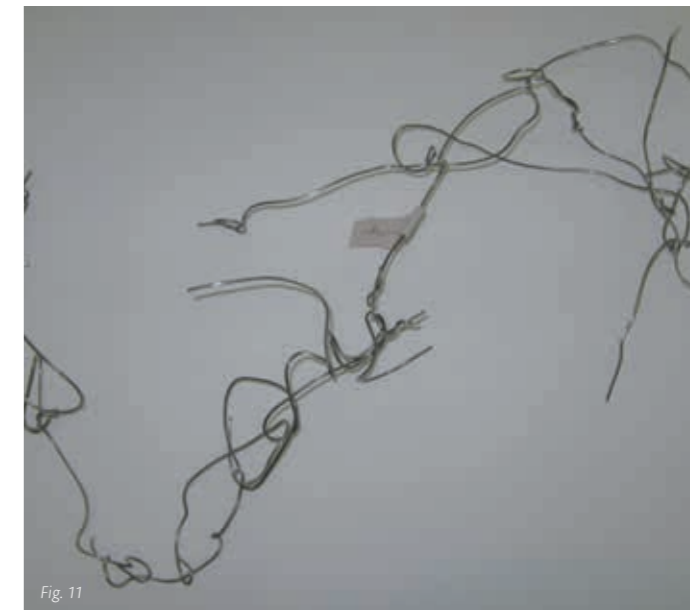


Fig. 11

“ It is not always easy and we often live with uncertainty but on the other hand it is exciting as we become learners with the children and they become teachers with us. ”

The wolf is good because he only ate the pigs that were dead...

“ In fables and fairytales it is the wolf who lawlessly huffs and puffs down the houses of the 3 little pigs and heartlessly swallows Red Riding Hood. ”



These stories, and some children's games such as, "What's the time Mr. Wolf?" are part of a rich inheritance from the past in which the wolf plays a significant and stereotypical role...that of villain. (Fig 1)

So, the wolf has been at the receiving end of a lot of bad publicity! There are now however many pro-wolf well wishers who are out to even the balance and transform and rehabilitate him with stories such as "The True Story of the Three Little Pigs"¹ by Jon Scieszka, and "The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig"² by Eugene Trivizas, illustrated by Helen Oxenbury.

We decided to look at how powerful stereotypes are in children's literature?

We set out to investigate what the children's perceptions were of the wolf or fox, as a character in children's literature that they may have been exposed to thus far.

We also wanted to observe how the children might interpret the character of the wolf, after exposing them to stories where the wolf takes on the role of a reformed protagonist.

We wondered how the children would be influenced by their exposure to stories with the wolf as villain, or as friend, when they began to write their own stories. Would in fact the children's own narrative include the fox as the villain, or would the children be happy so long as there WAS a villain.

Not surprisingly, during an initial discussion, the children recalled stories that were familiar, such as, "The Three Little Pigs," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Pinocchio," "The Gingerbread Man," and so on. There was total agreement that in these familiar stories the wolf was the villain.

We exposed the children to many other stories about foxes or wolves, and in these stories, the wolf is a central, but not necessarily a bad character.

In some stories he would start out as a bad individual, but his behaviour would change, and he would learn the error of his ways. In others, the story would be told from the wolf's point of view.

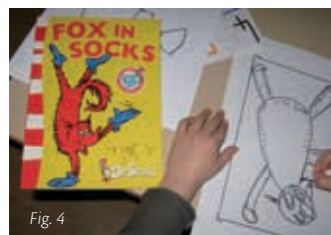
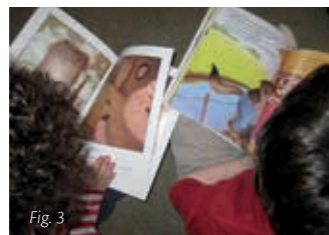
In his book, "Magic Capes, Amazing Powers – Transforming Superhero Play in the Classroom," Eric Hoffman states, "A stereotype is a belief about someone, based on a person's membership in a group, rather than the persons own behaviour."³

When discussing the story of "Rocky and the Lamb"⁴ by Greg Gormley and Lynne Chapman, this did not appear to be the case. When discussing the story with the children, the wolf appears to be judged solely on his own behaviour within the text.

The children identified Rocky's 'bad behaviour' early on in the story...

In the beginning he took the rabbit's backpack.

When the lamb said, "Don't open the box", he did.



He tried to steal the crown.

They then identified his 'reformed behaviour' in the later part of the story....

He felt sorry for being wicked.

He promised to be good and he kept his promise.

We shared these conversations with our colleagues in the ELC, in order to see the direction the children's thinking was taking.

What we discovered from the discussions was that the behaviour of the wolves in the stories was important to the children. They seem to disagree with the little pig, who in the story "The Three Little Pigs Meet the Fox," (Hugh Smith) says sadly, "Animals like the wolf never learn to be kind to anyone."⁵

Humans who are bad people are good sometimes. In W.W. 2, people recognised they were in the bad team in Germany, so they turned into the good team, because they were doing bad stuff...because they were killing other people.

When somebody was on the good side, he turned into the bad side, he went to the dark side. He would only turn back into a goodie if someone destroyed him.

We asked the children to think about what constituted 'bad' behaviour and was there a difference between 'bad' behaviour and 'naughty' behaviour. Many moral discussions ensued.

You be bad for a few years or forever.

If you hurt someone once, and say sorry, you're naughty.

Naughty is if you do mischief stuff like not listen to your Mum.... that's cheeky.

As a result of these conversations, we wondered if the children thought that a bad person is born good and becomes bad, or is a bad person born bad?

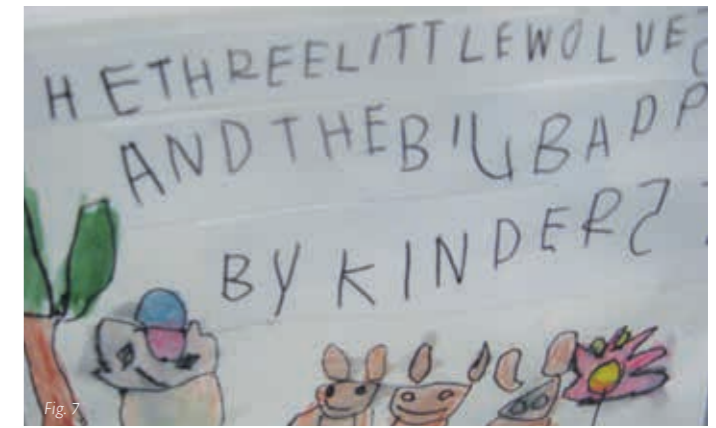
When they're a baby, they wouldn't know how to be bad. They started hurting animals first when they're a kid, and when they grow up they hurt people.

As educators we continue to be challenged by the complexity of our young children's thinking. Discussions about morality continue in our classroom, with the children now interested in the fact that some adults behave badly, and that even adults make mistakes. We are excited to see the children also making connections about behaviour and choices within the context of stories they are being exposed to in Jewish Studies. It is a rich and worthwhile discussion.

We have also observed how the wolf is portrayed in illustrations, and some of the children have expressed an interest in drawing wolves. (Fig 2 & 3)

Some children have copied familiar drawings, and some have drawn their own interpretation of the 'wolf' or 'wolves' as depicted in various stories. (Fig 4, 5, 6 & 7)

The children have written their own story with a wolf as a character, titled,



"The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig."

The following are excerpts from their story:

The third wolf named Adam made his house out of wood and nails and cement. ...One day the Big Bad Pig was hungry, and he felt like eating a wolf...In the morning the wolves had a breakfast of chicken and egg... Their underwear had wolves all over it...The pigs tummy was so fat that it got squashed in the chimney and it exploded... The pig went inside the pot...and it turned into a big fat flower...The wolves gave it water every day, and when they looked at it, they remembered the Big Bad Pig, and how they had not been his dinner.

This story has such a rich narrative, and we can see influences from familiar stories.

The Big Bad Pig said, 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down.

Mixed with original problem solving ideas:

Pig said, 'I'll huff and I'll puff, and I'll get a canon and blow down your house.

With some social comments thrown in:

The wolf started to cry because no one was playing with him.

References:

- 1 *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by Jon Scieszka, Publisher: Penguin Group (USA) 1989
- 2 *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*, by Eugene Trivizas Publisher: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing 1997
- 3 *Magic Capes, Amazing Powers – Transforming Superhero Play in the Classroom* by Eric Hoffman. Publisher: Redleaf Press 2004
- 4 *Rocky and the Lamb* by Greg Gormley First published in Great Britain in 2006 by Gullane Children's Books.
- 5 *The Three Little Pigs Meet the Fox* by Hugh Smith

“ Our dances with wolves continues, with each of our families being the authors of a surprise story for their child, with, of course, our favourite wolf as protagonist... ”

Every tree has to have more trees around as a family...



“Inside the forest is the child. The forest is beautiful, fascinating, green and full of hopes. There are no paths, although it isn’t easy, we have to make our own paths, as teachers, and children and families, in the forest. Sometimes we find ourselves together within the forest, sometimes we may get lost from each other, sometimes we’ll greet each other from far away across the forest; but it’s living together in the forest that is important.”¹ (Loris Malaguzzi 1993)



The bush fire had destroyed many lives in Victoria and everyone was talking about it. We heard children talking amongst themselves and soon this was the topic during our mat time discussion:

Our intent from the beginning of this year was to get the children to understand that we are all connected, not only to each other but with nature as well. We wanted to offer the children opportunities to extend their perspective of togetherness.

After listening to their discussions we felt that the common thread was respect for the environment and the impact on our lives. Together with my colleagues, we discussed what the children could learn from this experience of the bush fires. How much did they understand about this? It was important for us to reflect on their statements. During our discussion one of the children said,

All the trees have burnt in the bush fire and now the people in Marysville will not have any trees

We do need trees

It gives us wood to burn when it is cold

It gives us tissues and paper

It helps us breath fresh air

It gives us fruits and vegetables

From these conversations we could see what knowledge the children already had.

However would the children be able to apply this knowledge to different experiences?

We took the children to the big playground to see and observe different trees. On our return I overheard two children having a conversation as they were looking at the logs and the trees:

It must have taken a long time for these trees to grow so long – (as he spoke he looked at a tree from the bottom to the top)

It takes a hundred million years for the trees to grow

Logs are part of the trees

Concurrently in the class, children were observing seeds growing.



Would the children make a connection between the seeds and the trees?

Looks like it is growing

Is it a tree or a plant?

It is a plant. A plant is small and a tree is big. (Fig 1 & 2)

The children watched the plant growing as they continued to water and measure the growth of the plant.

Further to our earlier intent we invited the children to think about whether trees need to grow among other trees?

What sort of relationship do trees have with each other?

We began by making the analogy between the plant and the trees. Would our plant be happier with other plants in the vegetable garden?

This whole process of taking responsibility for the plant was meaningful for the children. The growing of a seed may have helped children establish the fact that if it took us the whole of the first term to record the tiny growth then it would take a very long time for the trees to grow big and tall.

It has not changed

It is taking too long, it is not growing

It is growing but you can't see

Because it is growing very slowly

It will grow if you stop looking at it

You need to put a big seed to grow a big tree

No you don't. You just need to wait a bit longer

To extend the children's thinking we value the importance of the graphic languages. Drawing is a powerful tool. This can enhance the children's abilities to think, feel and imagine and to share ideas with others. It is a tool for children to explore many interests and events around them. Another walk with the children gave the opportunity to further develop the children's observation and classification skills by looking for similarities as well as differences between the trees. Each child saw differently, each chose different parts to draw. It always involves interaction between seeing and reasoning, feeling and memory as well as interaction with materials. The more opportunities children have to draw from life and look intently at things – the more complex, the theories become. Children shared the experience and joy with other children in the class. (Fig 3, 4 & 5)

Colour mixing, shape, texture, line relating to drawing and painting became an opportunity for peer learning. Their problem solving through the construction of trees using clay helped the children apply their strategy to construct other 3 dimensional structures such as people, bridge, chair etc. (Fig 6)

You need to have a big piece of clay at the bottom and a little one at the top to make it stand.

We saw the relationships between the children and the trees developing and wondered if the children made a connection between the trees and themselves?

Every tree has to have more trees around as a family

Trees are happy because they are next to each other like one big family



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



We posed the question, "Who is the trees family?"

All the same trees are one family like we are the same in my family. Everyone in my family has the same last name. That means we are one family

As an extension to this investigation we linked our understandings of growth and connections to trees and each other with reference to our extended families specially grandparents.

What followed and leading up to our traditional grandparents Shabbat were the following questions.

As part of our identity, how could we connect the children to our cultural heritage?

What are the roots of the tree for?

What do family roots means?

References:

1 Malaguzzi, L.1993, "Your Image of the Child: Where Teaching Begins", Exchange 3, June 1993, p.54.



Fig. 6



Prep

“ What opportunities could we provide for both generations to make further steps towards each other and reinforce our original intent of connectedness? ”

Who Am I and Who Are We?...

“At the beginning of the year with a new group of prep children our intent was to find out who we are as individuals, within a classroom community, and in the wider community.”



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

When looking at the notion of whether a group of individuals spending time together, learning about each other and valuing each other's originality can build a community/group of children who show respect and empathy towards each other we asked ourselves the following questions.

Would this lead to a cohesive group that could become a respected and valued part of the larger/wider community?

Would the children's shared understandings and shared memories build this new classroom?

How would we gauge this as being understood, developed and achieved by the children?

We began our research into this investigation by asking

How does the child see themselves?

Is it their physical characteristics and facial features?

Is it their personal traits?

Is it related to their family culture?

Or could it be a combination of all of them?

We asked the children to draw their faces posing the questions "when you look at your face what makes you, you?" "What makes you look different to your friends?" We gave the children mirrors so they could look closely at their facial features. We asked the children to draw their faces using black fineliner. Our reason for this being that we wanted the children to focus on the finer details of their faces rather than the shades and colouring of their skin, hair and eyes. (Fig 1 & 2)

Using clay as another material for interpretation we asked the children

to revisit these questions. We were interested in observing whether the use of another material would see the children represent themselves in a different way.

It was interesting to observe that all of the children made 2D models and most of the children carved their features in the clay rather than adding onto their faces.

Our intent was to get the children to look more closely at their faces and their features, to notice what was unique to them. Was it the way we had explained our intent that had led the children to make the 2D models?

Was it the tools that we gave them to use? We had given the children a container with a large variety of different tools, including rolling pins. Could it have been the rolling pins that caught the children's eye and led them to make 2D models?

Could we have facilitated a change in the way the children used the clay? Would this have impacted on the way in which they produced their clay face?

Perhaps if we had set up the provocation differently and given the children balls of clay as opposed to solid blocks and left the rolling pins out of the box of tools, the results may have been different. The way in which we set up a provocation and the environment can affect the way in which children think and create.

Using photos and written observations we documented the children using clay. (Fig 3, 4, 5)

I'm curling my pieces of clay to make my hair, it's curly.

I used this thing to make my hair. (Potato masher) I hit the little spikes onto the clay like this (demonstrates the action). My hair feels spiky, want

to feel it?

It does feel spiky but it doesn't hurt.

I'm cutting the clay and making twirls (points to her hair). I have little twirls.

My face has hair, eyes and a mouth. I need ears.

My ears are behind my hair.

It was interesting to observe through this conversation how the focus of their discussion related to their hair and how they would best represent it using the clay. For some of the children this posed the greatest dilemma because they didn't know how to attach the hair to their face.

Using colour as a vehicle for the children to revisit the initial questions we asked the children, "what colour do you think best tells us about you?"

I chose white because it's like peace and I want lots of peace.

I did light green because it reminds me of nature and nature is important to me.

I chose yellow because the sun is yellow and it's shiny and bright and it makes me feel nice and warm.

What we began to notice from this was that the children's personality came out in their choices and comments rather than their facial features. It led us to look once again at the definition of identity. According to a dictionary definition, 'identity is the set of behavioural or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group.' This led us to believe that personal characteristics also seemed to play a major role in the children's interpretation of 'who am I?'

Then we asked the children to draw an image that best described them. It was interesting to note that once again similarities relating to what the children drew occurred. Many drew images of what they enjoyed doing or things that are important to them. Was it these similarities that helped forge the friendships and interactions that would help shape our class community?

Many of the children's images were of them playing in their garden, playing outside with friends, activities related to nature or activities shared with their family.

When we asked them to describe their drawings words such as 'love', 'being happy' and 'like' occurred with regularity even though the children didn't hear each other comment.

I love being with friends and I play outside in my cubby house. I like playing outside because I love the sun and how pretty the flowers are.

I think nature gives me peace, that's why I like nature.

I've drawn me when I'm happy. Fun things make me happy. Exciting stuff makes me happy. I like to play games with my friends, it also makes me happy. I like getting treats from my family.

As the children had been focussing on themselves and their interpretations we now asked them to work in pairs, to sit opposite each other and to take turns to draw each other's faces. (Fig 6)

What we found interesting was that every child felt that their partner had drawn them as they thought they should look. (Fig 7 & 8)

Was it due to the fact that as a class we had discussed how important it was to value everyone's originality and comments, and to value our class as a group?

After the children had completed the portraits we gave them time to sit and talk to their partner. (Fig 9)



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

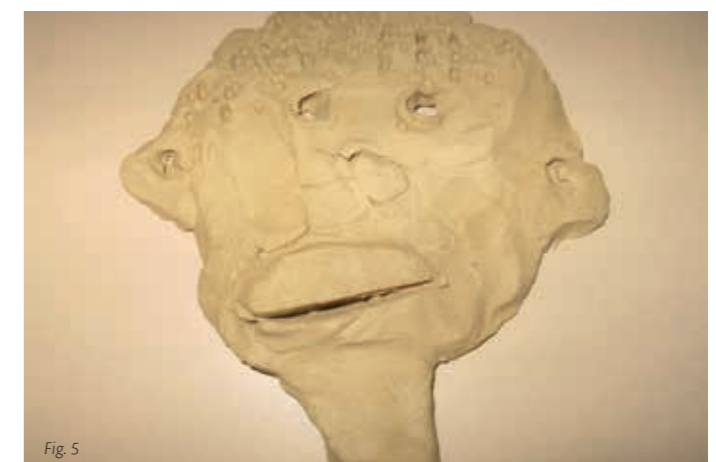


Fig. 5

Then we asked them to share with the teacher individually, why their partner was important to our class and support and justify their comments.

She is very nice because she's really kind to all of us especially her friends.

She's really good to play with and she likes to have fun. She loves to draw with us and she makes things for everyone in the class.

He is special because he always lets whoever wants to play, play with him. If you need some help like with the building he will always stop what he's doing and come and help you and then go back to his thing.

He is a good friend because he can help people if they hurt themselves.

He says "are you okay?" He makes people feel good about themselves.

He's always happy and a good friend to everyone.



Fig. 6

“

The children are together for two years and this is only the beginning of their journey. Based on the children's comments so far and our reflections of this part of the investigation we are looking to follow two paths. Firstly, we are still interested to see if the child's cultural and family background has an effect on who the children are as individuals. Following this we intend to focus on what leads these unique individuals to become a cohesive, empathetic and respectful community within our Early Learning Centre. ”



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

“What is the use of a fine house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?”¹ Henry David Thoreau

“

On our first day of prep, 24 children arrived and were invited into the classroom. Some knew one another reasonably well because they had been together for two years in kindergarten; some knew one another as family friends; some knew one another from the kindergarten playground or other shared spaces in the centre and some didn't know one another at all. ”

As we were to be together for two years, it became important that we should develop a cohesive community. Our understanding and desire was to develop a unified, interconnected, communal and resourceful class community. We considered that one of our roles as the classroom teachers was to facilitate this intent with this new community of children. To begin with, we explored the word 'community' with the children, by asking the question: 'What do you think the word 'community' means?' It appeared that they were unfamiliar with the word community.

It means that you have to read.

Working.

That there's a fire.

You might have to do something or not.

You have to do your alphabet in your book.

It means hard work.

We reflected on the question that we had asked and wondered if we could have posed it in a different way or rephrased it such that it might have given them a better understanding of what 'community' was.

I have always encouraged an appreciation and respect for animals, wildlife, nature, ecosystems, and conservation within the classroom environment by having class pets, as well as worm farms, snail gardens and planting of seeds in the room. I feel that this fosters a sense of responsibility for living things and is also an excellent way for students to learn about general biology and about habitat conservation, animals' survival needs, and animals' adaptations to their environments. The animals can raise the consciousness of students and spark concern for wildlife. We already had a fish tank in our classroom and we thought that this was an opportunity for the children to observe and recognise the aquarium as a 'community'. During a discussion with a colleague, she suggested that we read the book "Swimmy" by Leo Lionni² to illustrate the correlation between the real, authentic and actual fish in our classroom and the imaginative characters within the book. This certainly helped the children to develop a better understanding of what it means to be part of a 'community':

We have to work together. We learned that 'Goodness comes out of Badness'.

You have to work as a team to make things better. The fish had to get bigger so that other things couldn't eat them.

We learned that if you work together you can fight bigger fish – you need to make a team.

You can make friends by working together with people you don't know.

Community is when you are going to work together like building something with blocks or making a space ship.

The school of fish were working together to make a community.

It became evident that the children regarded 'working together' as an important part of being a 'community' and so we explored what 'work' means:

It means to do a job.

Working means like helping as a community.

It means building something and having people to help.

It's like a favour when you do something to help someone.

We reflected on how to create an environment that encouraged the children to problem solve and think collaboratively about meaningful, purposeful and relevant hypotheses.

We began to explore these values within our community. We considered the universal, religious, spiritual and cultural values that are specific to our community and we posed the question 'What do you think value means?'

A value is when you go to the supermarket and you are paying them and they are giving you something instead.

A value is the cost of something from the supermarket.

'What do you think our values are?'

A value is if you help someone with something then that is nice.

A value is a rule.

A value is what you should and shouldn't do.

You are responsible and respect someone's things.

With this final comment, we decided that we should determine what their comprehension of the word 'responsibility' was:

Responsibility is taking care of something that you really want to have.

If you are at school and there is a new boy or girl at the school it is your responsibility to look after them.

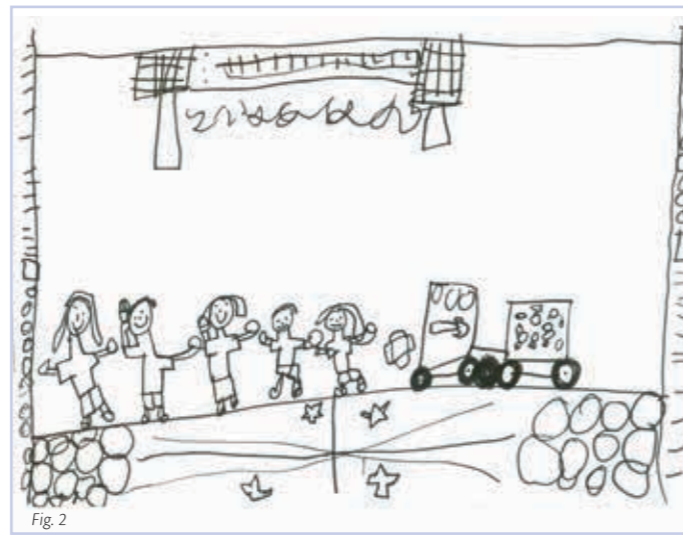
Responsibility is when someone hurts themselves and there is no-one there it is your responsibility to help them.

As a result of reading the book 'Belonging'³ by Jeanne Baker, the children were encouraged to share and draw their knowledge of their own neighbourhood and how they perceived their neighbourhood to look. We felt it was important that the children feel an attachment and responsibility towards the school and its environs, so we set about exploring the children's sense of place within the school grounds and they identified areas in which they most enjoyed spending time when they were at school. I invited a group of children that I had previously taught to share an investigation based on the design and construction of a birdbath to protect and conserve the birds during the drought. (Fig 1, 2, 3 & 4)

We can be a community by helping each other...

“

The prep year begins and the children from the three different kinder classes merge for the first time. Included in this new mix may be several children from other schools that have recently joined Bialik.”



This class created a birdbath which had yet to find its 'place' in our school environment as it was still being housed in storage.

During our meeting with the Year 6 the prep children posed questions. (Fig 5)

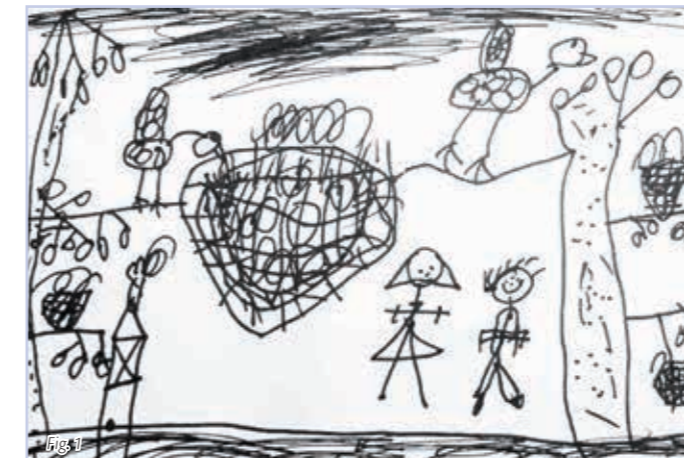
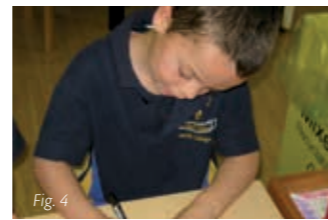
- How did you make it?
- Who designed it?
- Was it fun making?
- Who painted it?
- Where did you get the parts from?
- Was it difficult to make?
- How did it dry and become hard?
- How did you make the big round 'cup'?
- How did you make the decorations on the 'cup'?
- Did you use glue?
- Did you mix the paint to get the colours?
- Is it a water fountain or a pond?
- Did you use cement?
- Did you make it for a reason?

The preps and year 6 met in the playground to identify a 'place' for the birdbath. They agreed they would like to work together to create this special place for the birds. (Fig 6)

The Prep children wanted to make something that could add to the beauty and presence of the birdbath within the environment. Their decision was to make stepping stones and to decorate them in such a way that it would complement what the other children had made. They discussed what they would like to put on the stepping stones and then drew some designs.

References:

- 1 http://thinkexist.com/quotation/what-s_the_use_of_a_fine_house_if_you_haven-t_got/208880.html
- 2 *Swimmy* Leo Leoni – Alfred A Knopf Books for Young Readers .N.Y
- 3 *Belonging* – Jeanne Baker – Walker Books Ltd



The prep year begins and the children from the three different kinder classes merge for the first time. Included in this new mix may be several children from other schools that have recently joined Bialik.

How are the children supported in their new prep environment?

The teacher has an important role to play as facilitator, helping the children develop a sense of community and belonging through valuing the uniqueness and originality of each member within the class community, and in so doing supporting and celebrating the weaving of relationships and friendships in this way.

The value of a closely woven community, one that supports and helps each other, what does this mean for the child? Helping the children develop skills and strategies needed to feel this connection to the group and in being able to work and play as a team has been an important factor in the building of our class community.

Questions that we considered and explored began to emerge:

Does the building up of relationships make up a community?
Do diverse abilities and originality unify a group if students are given opportunities to share what they have to offer within a safe, welcoming environment devoid of judgment?

As part of the class community how can we – the children, families and teachers contribute something of value to the group that will enhance our sense of community and belonging?

The sharing of a bird's nest that was found on the ground and brought in by one of the children became a wonderful impetus in our exploration towards the forming of our class community.

When sharing the documentation about the bird's nest and the concept of community with my colleagues, we realized that what could have been merely a topic became a provocation that challenged both teachers and

children. We began to see the links and connection with the metaphor of weaving (such as the weaving of a bird's nest), as threads that when intertwined make the weave / community stronger and richer.

When looking at the nest one child had brought in, the children began to consider the links with community. We noticed the children thinking of the relationships between birds, and how the group is an important factor in coming together. They expressed the concept of community as helping and assisting each other.

Birds can become a community.

Birds fly together because they are a community and like each other.

The birds would help each other.

They can be friends with other birds and the more they play with each other the more they will be friends.

Another provocation was offered for the children to consider as we shared a video by Richard Attenborough on "How Weaver Birds build their nests". Together we observed how weaver birds build their nests hanging from branches of the same tree using an intricate weave of knots and shapes to weave the nest. (Fig 1 & 2)

By asking the children "What do we need to think about when deciding where to live and where to build our houses", we hoped to bring the children closer towards considering the needs of our community.

We ask each other where we should build our house.

We build our houses next to each other.

So we can then be neighbours.

So we can speak to them and be company.

And have company.

“

This collaboration continues...”

”

The children used many languages to communicate their ideas and share their knowledge. They used drawings to make their thinking visible and discussed ideas within small group interactions that offered a safe and intimate forum where the children felt comfortable to share. (Fig 3, 4 & 5)

The acknowledgement of assistance and the recognizing of strengths in others was a feature in the development of our class community.

Encouraging the children to explore what they felt their strengths were, guided them towards recognizing and appreciating their unique ability/s, and of the possibility to share, help and give of themselves to others. This was imperative in the forming of connections, relationships and friendships. Realizing that they had something to offer through discovering common interests took the pressure off "finding a friend to play with", in favour of developing connections through "what do we enjoy doing together?" For example; "Lets take the soccer ball out to play and we can show each other how far we can kick the ball or how well we can dribble the ball." (Fig 6 & 7)

The reciprocity of the nature of these interactions helped to instill in the children a sense of pride, accomplishment and recognition within the class community in the mutuality and positive responses to the actions of others. Working as a team became evident as common bonds developed into possible friendships, "weaving" the class community.

The building of our class community involves the process of time. Having the same children in the same class for two years as we do, provides this precious ingredient needed for relationships and friendships to develop.

Our hypothesis is that over this two year process the children will feel a sense of connection and belonging that in turn provides them with the problem solving and communication strategies that will benefit them in the years to come.

Fig 1 & 2: All the nests hanging together look like a city.

Fig 3 & 4 & 5: Sharing as part of a group.

Fig 6: I am happy to teach Joy chess because then Joy knows how to play and then I can play with her.

Fig 7: If you jump like you are on a trampoline you can pull yourself up Jess.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



“

Our hypothesis is that over this two year process the children will feel a sense of connection and belonging that in turn provides them with the problem solving and communication strategies that will benefit them in the years to come. ”

Year 1

'27 countries, 23 identities, 1 community'...

“ This ring is from one of my grandparents. She was very old and came from Russia. We call her Baba Hala. When she came from Russia she couldn't stay there because there was a war that was going to happen so they had to leave. She gave my mum a ring which I have. It's special to me because it's from a different country. Maybe those rings were part of the family... They were. ”



As the stories of our ancestors are uncovered, we find that we are not only unique as individuals, but that we are also a product of many other unique individuals. It is the stories of our ancestors which have brought us to where we are and make up a part of who we are. During our first year together in prep, the children explored their own identities through ideas such as *reading peoples faces*; where features, expressions and gestures become a powerful language, assisting in determining particular responses and in turn helping to shape one's thinking as a result. Further to this, the children discussed the use of hand and body gestures, and how their particular interests or hobbies also contributed to developing one's identity or how others 'saw you' through thoughts of 'Where have my feet travelled?' These ideas were explored by the children through different media such as line, shape, colour, and symbol, developing the idea that visual communication should not be referred to as the realm of the young, but is in fact an integral part of making meaning throughout one's life.



This year the children's discussions have led them to further explore their identity in relation to their family and the history that they share. As the children began to bring objects and stories belonging to past family members to share with the class, I wondered how they would relate these to themselves. Would they identify them as an important contribution to their own identity, giving them a sense of place; or merely objects and memories from the past belonging to people with whom they had no relationship? These questions formed the basis for our intent of developing in the children an understanding of how the stories of our ancestors contribute to the development of our individual identities; and for the children to explore and develop an understanding of the various ways in which stories can be shared and passed down to succeeding generations. During various planning meetings, we discussed how the children might explore these ideas through the relationships they have with their families, their sense of place, and how these might impact on their developing identities. In investigating these thoughts, we felt the children would develop an understanding that the stories of their ancestors do in fact contribute to the development of identity; and given the opportunity to explore the communication of stories throughout different cultures, we hoped the children would develop not only a tolerance, but appreciation and respect for the traditions and stories of different cultures around the world.

Through discussion at school and at home, the children discovered that we had family from 27 countries. From this knowledge, the children began

to wonder where these countries were and what in fact they knew about them. (Fig 1)

I know that Russia is a big country because on the globe and on the map it looks big to me and my Russian name is Lucyincka. I wonder how you speak the rest of the Russian language.

I wonder how many countries and Islands there are in the world. And I wonder what countries are the biggest.

I wonder how far South Africa is from Australia.

I know Israel is small because on maps it's small. Smaller than Australia.

I know in Russia there is a statue with a man riding a horse. I forget his name, but he saved Russia.

How many people are there in the world?

I know that people speak different languages in different countries.

From various discussions our investigation started to take two paths, each working in parallel with one another.

The first had the children continue to explore their own identities through the relationships and encounters they have with their family and environment. That is, the personal stories they might share with one another. As the children continued to deepen their understanding of the stories that we each leave behind to shape a culture, they began to recognise that their own lives have been shaped by the stories of their ancestors. We uncovered stories of being smuggled out of one country and into another; stories of pirates and musicians; incredible stories that had never been shared before. This assisted the children's discovery that there are many layers in addition to their Jewish Australian heritage that linked together to develop their identity. (Fig 2 & 3)

All of these, although not unique to the individual, became important in the children developing a personal history, remembering those who they've never met yet who are a part of them. But what are the stories the children will pass on? What do they consider important about who they are now, their interests, their expressions and gestures, their sense of place, their relationships, and how they have grown? What would they share with others as being a part of their identity? Some felt their dancing expressed who they were, others reflected on their participation in various sports within a team as a major factor in their identity. (Fig 4)

The second path had the children explore the various ways in which the cultures of their ancestors pass their stories down to succeeding generations. Different cultures have used many modes of communication to tell and pass on their stories and traditions for centuries. The children were knowledgeable of stories being told through books, but we wondered whether the children were aware of other ways in which they can be shared. What's more, if stories aren't just shared using written language, how can we truly understand them?

Through dialogue with one another, the children acknowledged many ways in which stories are told among and across different cultures.

How might other cultures make their stories visible to us?

You could tell a story by showing pictures and work out what they're doing.

You could sing a story.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

You could dance. Say you wanted to be a fairy; you could put ballet music on and move your arms.

You could listen to the music and understand what it means to you, because music can mean lots of things to you.

What happens if they speak a different language and you can't understand it?

They've got their own language. They talk with their own language and that's how they tell their story. The countries can also just tell with pictures and no writing. Some have writing and no pictures so you can imagine what the story is telling you.

Aboriginals tell their stories with music. They also tell their stories with words.

What became apparent to the children was that although stories may be told in different languages or by different cultures, they can still be understood through the gestures, symbols, movements and music different cultures possess. What changes however is the meaning and interpretation for each individual. We wanted the children to have the opportunity to explore these thoughts further.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Within our classroom we immersed ourselves in exploring and interpreting the different ways of communicating and how stories can be shared. We listened and danced to different types of music (Fig 5 & 6), we explored story being told through movement and performance (Fig 7), we looked at symbols and images, using our knowledge and imagination to interpret the stories around us.

The children also shared their stories and understandings using clay models and other materials to create short animated film clips. (Fig 8, 9 & 10)

During an excursion to the Indigenous Australian exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, the children discovered that not only do the creative works share many different stories, but they are also shared and produced in many different ways such as sculpture, paintings on canvas, bark and other surfaces depicting symbolic images, and using *colours of the land*. (Fig 11 & 12)

The children slowly began to discover that their lives were full of stories, surrounding them from all different aspects. Not only were the children exploring different cultures at a deeper level, but they were gaining an appreciation for other cultures and exploring the different languages and modes of communication used to share the traditions and stories passed on.

And thus, many layers were starting to unfold in regards to uncovering our individual identities. As a class, we have one other identity to explore that links us altogether as a community, our class community. In this community we share experiences and stories everyday. We have expectations of one another and values we endeavour to uphold. These are what bond us together. Taking from the powerful learning the children had engaged in, we revisited the flag our class had created in prep together, the symbol for our classroom community, unique to us, and created by us; a symbol of the common understandings we have and the culture of our community. Part of the story of our class journey together. (Fig 13)

The Magen David represents our Jewish culture, the culture we have inherited from our ancestors or is a part of our lives. *Bialik is a Jewish school and we are part of a Jewish community.*

The white oval represents us as being part of a group and we're all different. *We look different and we are all different on the inside. We have different thoughts and ways of thinking. It is white to represent peace.*

The yellow circle represents us as being a group of friends who all play and learn together, and help each other. It shows that we are a team.

The red square is our learning area. It is a place where our class community shares and learns together. It is red because sometimes we disagree, but we respect what other people have to say, even if we don't like it.

Finally, the blue background represents the different feelings we have. *We are sometimes sad and other times happy. We have fear and we are also brave.*

From all of our learning about our identities, our last wondering and challenge for the children is how might they make the meaning of our community visible? How might they demonstrate the feeling and thoughts we each possess individually and collectively about our classroom community and the common understandings we have? Indeed, how might they share the story of our journey together?



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Fig 1: Countries our families were born

Fig 2: Granny Lily travelled from the USA in 1910 to Germiston in South Africa and then Melbourne in 2000.

Fig 3: One of my great grandfathers was smuggled out of Lithuania on a train in a hat and sent to South Africa with his older brother.

Fig 4: When I dance I feel like I am a real ballerina. When I do the dance for the concert, I feel like I am a little doll because it is a funny dance about rag dolls. Dancing is movement. You can put your hands up on your head but a bit higher.

Fig 5: Dance is movement. I think dance is important because it tells people what they are doing. Dance can sometimes be hard. Dancing is performing. Dancing can be lots of things, movement, performing and other things. Dancing is acting.

Fig 6: I was listening to the piece of music. It was Russian. It is a Russian Lullaby. I know because my mum sings it to me. It is singing about sleep toys.

Fig 7: They're playing on drums and clapping. They're playing music. They're singing. The music was scary because there were big noises like they were hitting hard. I think there are men playing the didgeridoo and women are dancing and singing.

Fig 8 & 9: You can read a persons face and it tells you something about their identity.

Fig 10: If the hands are the same they have to come from the one body. Every person has different hands.

Fig 11: Child looking at a totem pole. It was a tree and then it was coloured and cut out. It has sea creatures and some nature and some patterns. There is black, white, orange and brown, because they were the original colours that aboriginals used

Fig 12: Symbols observed by the children. Symbols are used so that people who can't understand the language can still understand. They can tell us things to do or stories using pictures.

Fig 13: Class Flag.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

“From all of our learning about our identities, our last wondering and challenge for the children is how might they make the meaning of our community visible? How might they demonstrate the feeling and thoughts we each possess individually and collectively about our classroom community and the common understandings we have? Indeed, how might they share the story of our journey together?”

Keepers of the river...

“ The year began by revisiting our relationships with each other and continuing the sense of community we had shared in Prep. We wanted the opportunity for the children to deepen their thinking and to help them shape their connections to their community and the value of the many aspects that can influence changing one’s environment. ”



Fig. 1

During our prep year together, we had explored the Yarra river and its relationship to the establishment of communities alongside it. The children developed a great interest in the origins of the Yarra and the extent of this body of water from where it originated and where it travelled.

Early in this year several teachers made the acquaintance of a person who devotes his time to preserving the quality of this river by making people aware of its continued importance. He in fact made a statement which resonated with us. **“You need to feel a connection to something before you can truly care for it.”** Ian is a River Keeper. He is part of a world wide organisation of Water Keepers. His role is connected with the Yarra River.

We felt this person could offer us another insight into our connections with the values that sustain a community.

After some discussion, we posed a question to the children. “What do you think you know about the term Water Keeper?”

We were interested in the children’s initial theories. Having not been exposed to this term Water Keeper the children’s responses and drawings although literal did encompass opportunities to extend the idea of a water keeper as an active and authentic role within this investigation. (Fig 1, 2, 3 & 4)

We now felt that a visit from a River Keeper would be an enriching experience for us all. Last year we had spent time observing, listening, hearing, drawing, documenting the Yarra river. However, further to Ian’s comments...now we needed to enjoy it. We invited Ian to visit and he inspired us with his knowledge and passion. He talked about the Yarra being his neighbour and so he needed to care for it. He brought examples of wombat poo, moss and leaves. He showed us slides of activities on the water. The children were enthralled. They asked question after question. Ian was sharing his passion and it was infectious. (Fig 5)

He found moss near the Yarra river and it was very soft. He also showed us some wombat poo. It smelt smelly and I didn’t like it.

I enjoyed when Ian Penrose came to Teacher Helene’s room. He is a person who lives near the Yarra river. He goes rowing with people.’

He is a River Keeper because he loves the Yarra river.

We had looked at the Yarra from many aspects. It was time to expand our connection with it by enjoying it as many in our community do. This was not an investigation isolated in a classroom topic. We were focusing on



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

community which of course included our children as well as their parents and family. The parent representatives of the class arranged an afternoon for the families to row on another section of the Yarra at Studley Park. Not only was this an activity that most families had not been involved in before, many had not visited this part of the Yarra and were unaware of its history. Our intention was for us to recreate and enjoy the pleasures of this wonderful body of water together as an extended community. Ian was keen to join us. He spoke to us about the history of Studley Park and then we rowed! So much fun and the feedback from everyone involved was absolutely positive, combining friends and families with nature and what we had been caring about for so long in our class.(Fig 6, 7 & 8)

When we were on the Yarra river it made me think of the colours of the rainbow and it made me feel happy because I had lots of fun canoeing.

It made me think of green because there was a lot of trees and grass and leaves around me.

It made me think of the colour indigo because it made me feel peaceful.

When we went rowing we went upstream but the water actually goes downstream so we can’t stop rowing or canoeing if we go upstream or the water would take us backwards.

“Dear Grade 1K families,

Thank you to those families that came to the Yarra on Sunday afternoon. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to do something together as a class and to give the kids a chance to broaden their understanding of and feeling for the Yarra. And it was a lot of fun!”

Regards, Gretchen and Cassy(parent representatives in our class.)

In uncovering some of the historical stories of this part of the Yarra River during this afternoon adventure, we decided to continue and value this history and now look at the different ways this history and the subject of large bodies of water had been documented.

Together with parents we travelled to The National Gallery of Victoria to observe how the subject of water was depicted in paintings, sculptures and artifacts which held symbolic meaning within different cultures and periods in history. This building in itself is a Melbourne icon with its famous water wall. (Fig 9)



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

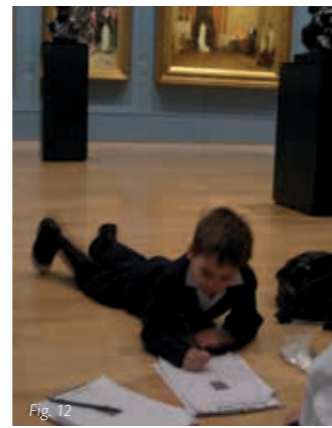
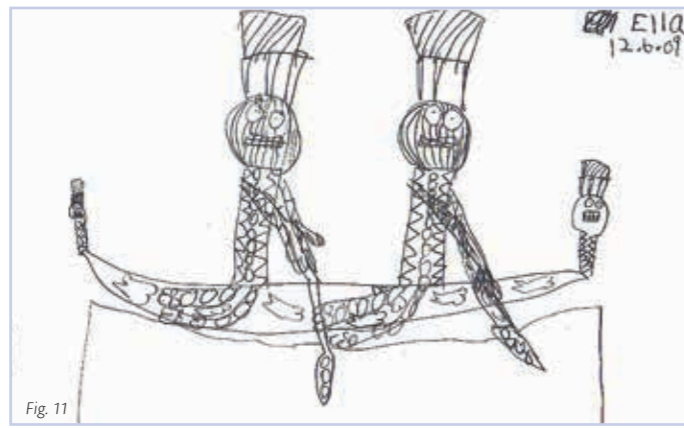


Fig. 9

Passing the English language around and around...

“

When people are born they learn the language that people speak – babies actually translate the language to themselves and then they can speak that language.”



The children were encouraged to observe and document their theories based on questions we posed which we believed would encourage deeper thinking rather than a quick response based on the likes or dislikes of the images. Many of the paintings were huge in size and the children were dwarfed in comparison. (Fig 10) This also led to a discussion about the power and meaning of the images depicted. Different periods in history also revealed different focuses, as did the subject matter based on the rivers and seas within different countries. The use of the waterwheel, a journey fraught with danger as a ship crosses a wild stretch of sea, a ceremonial canoe depicting the life journey of two brothers, a huge river stone shaped by the power of water, the use of dappled brushstrokes when viewed up close looked like pieces of colour and when viewed from a distance became the vibrant glow of the sun on the water. (Fig 11 & 12)

Our intent was that the connection we have established with the Yarra and water in general will continue to translate into a lifelong bond, a lifelong commitment to care for this precious entity.

When I'll be bigger I can show my children what I learnt in school. I'll write what I know in my diary.

When I'm an author I'm going to tell people all about the river and how it flows. When I have my lunch breaks I'll go to the Yarra to eat my lunch.

We have to live by the Yarra and we have to look after it and the trees to survive

Fortunately we were able to use our time on this journey with our community... to be, to do, to think and reflect, to enjoy and discover, to talk to each other and to listen.

Fig 3: Some one is looking after a pond at night

Fig 4: The water bottle is a water keeper

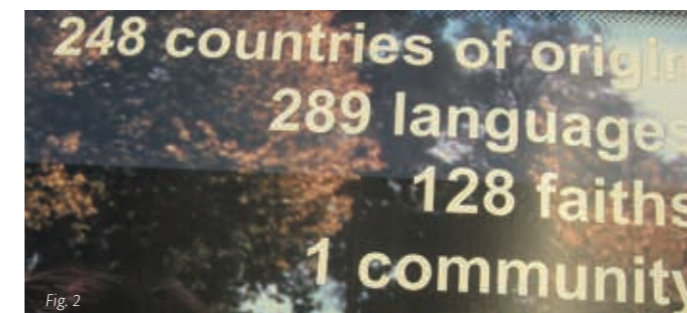
Fig 12: Maybe it's a reminder of something that happened.

References:

¹ Ian Penrose – Yarra River keeper
<http://www.waterkeepers.org.au/members/yarra-riverkeeper/>

“

Because we have had these children for two years this was not a topic but now a living and ongoing experience”



Last year the children investigated the concept of community and specifically where they fit and what role they play in the communities in which they find themselves. What became apparent from this investigation was the role of language and communication in a community.

Even amongst our own community it was difficult to determine a common understanding of this word. Communication was a vital factor in developing an understanding of one another within our own class and in the different situations that we find ourselves.

The children have shown an interest in the world around them and the countries from which their families originate. This has enabled us to explore the communities and languages of the countries in our world (Fig 1). A question that emerged from this interest was *Why are there so many different languages in the world?* Discussions began around this concept and we were eager to revisit this with the children this year.

The dialogue between home and school has played an important part in our investigation. We have continued to encourage the children to share their learning with their families and for the families to share their thoughts with us. Last year a parent brought in a picture of a poster that struck them as relevant to our investigation (Fig 2). This poster acted as a wonderful provocation for our thinking as we explored the make-up of our community in Prep. As our investigation has proceeded this year this poster once again provided a provocation. This time it acted as a stimulus to explore the idea of communication. Early this year we unpacked the second sentence of this poster with the children. One of the children's comments resonated within me. They said *if someone speaks another language then you can't understand them.*

Our intent for this investigation has been discussed, debated and reflected upon as we have moved forward in our learning journey. The common thread of our intent has been our desire to create a classroom community by being aware of the importance that language (in all it's forms) has in our community. By highlighting this within our class we wondered if the children would make the link to the languages in all the different areas of their life. In doing so, we also wondered if the children would become more aware of the choices that they make when they communicate, and consequently become more proficient at choosing appropriate 'languages' (including visual, text, oral, gestural, etc) for a given situation.

Within our classroom we have developed our own language, but are the children aware of this? How can we make them more aware of the importance of the ways in which they use and interpret language in their day to day life?

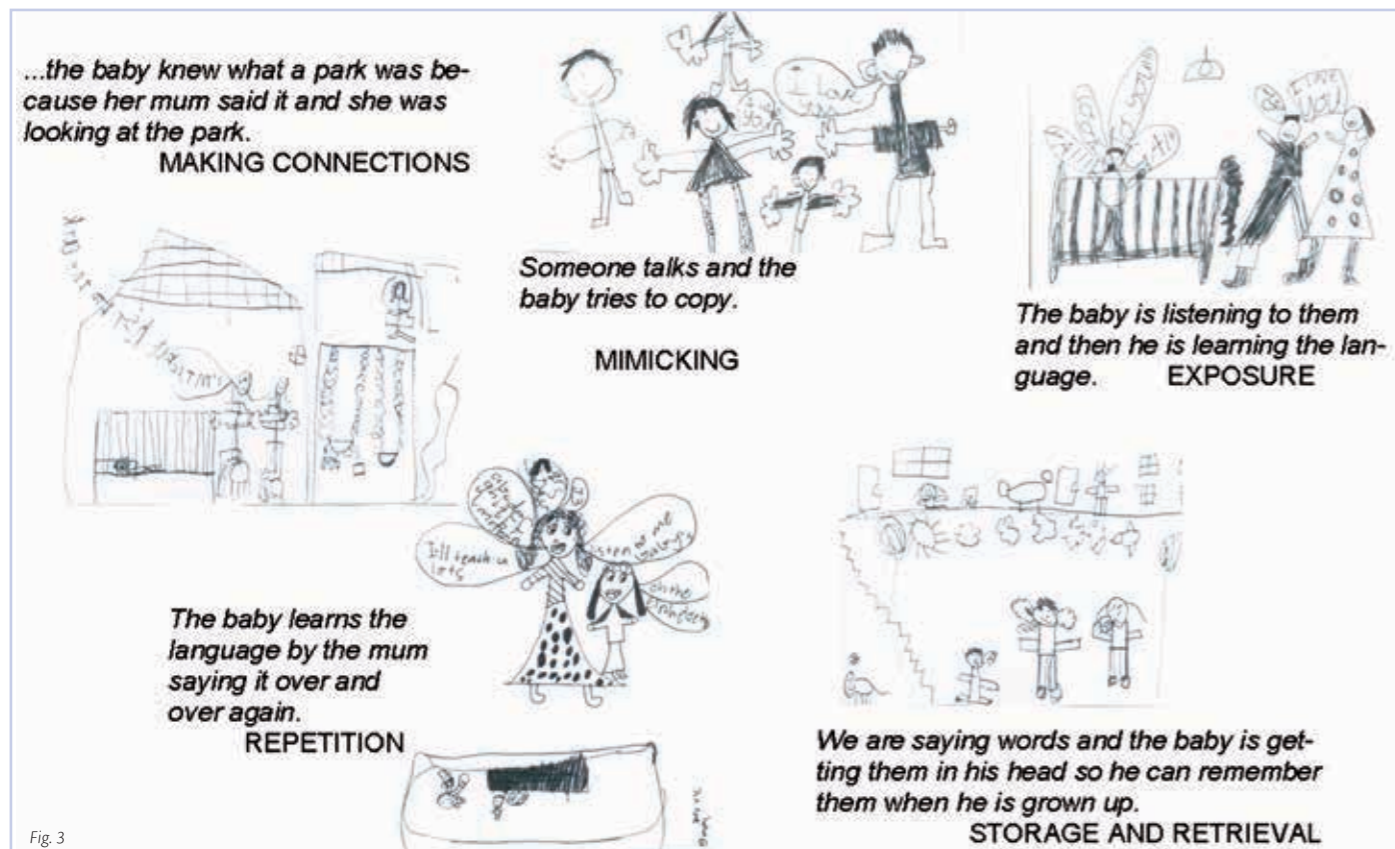


Fig. 3

We ask ourselves many questions to clarify our intent and the research that we are undertaking:

What common language have we developed within our class?

What role does repetitive exposure and experience have in the development of a common language?

Will the development of a common language influence the creation of a community?

Will an awareness of the role of a common language equip these children to make connections with others and in new situations?

It is so clear to us that the children are exposed to many different languages in their day to day life. These are influenced by many factors including experience, culture, background, interests and interactions. Together, with the thousands of verbal languages spoken in the world today there are so many other factors that contribute to our communication. It is fair to say that we all speak variations of a language, and in our society an openness to reflect on the interpretation and use of language is vital in our interactions.

Communication is a word that we have used frequently in the classroom but we wanted to uncover the children's interpretation of this word. As we discovered last year with our investigation into community, the use of a word varies so dramatically depending on experiences, background, feelings and so much more.

The children were asked 'What is communication?'

Sign language. For example, if we went to a shop and Chinese people own it and if we don't know how to say something then we use sign language. You can spell words.

What do you mean by that?

Like adults spell words so kids don't know what they are saying. But when you get older then you understand.

You write to them and they write back. And writing is like sign language because it's like using your hands except it's a piece of paper with letters.

Communication is like... words are communicating. When you talk... if you send SMS's on your phone it's like talking but writing on your phone. You're not saying it but they're reading what you want to say.

The children have been involved in many different experiences to further develop these understandings. They have looked at symbols, numbers and line as means of communication whilst also exploring similarities and differences across the languages used in our world. From this research the children concluded that all their forms of communication fitted in to four different categories. They labelled these sound, symbols, facial expressions and movements.

The children demonstrated a strong understanding of 'what communication is' but we wanted to further unpack their thoughts about 'language' specifically in response to many of their wonderings.

During discussions about 'what is language?' the children shared some wonderful thoughts...

Languages is different sort of words come out of peoples mouths but they mean the same thing but it is different words. Some person could say blah and another one could say yes.

Keep passing the English language around and around and around to different people.

You learn your first language where you live.

You learn your first language when you are young.

Languages are things that you hear that sound different to other things that you mostly hear.

When people are born they learn the language that people speak – babies actually translate the language to themselves and then they can speak that language.

This comment evoked much interest with the children and teachers. We saw this statement as an opportunity to unpack the children's thoughts about the learning process and as an opportunity to gather the children's current understanding of language acquisition.

Upon reflecting on their drawings and the children's explanations we were amazed by their ability to identify key learning strategies. Although they used different words many of their thoughts correlate to words that we, as teachers, hear in professional development sessions and use regularly to reflect on our teaching and learning. We have included a glimpse of some of the children's theories (Fig 3). The children's words are in italics and the corresponding term that we use is written underneath in capital letters.

The children's ability to identify some of the key elements of learning language and their ability to reflect on these strategies highlighted their awareness of the way we learn the languages that we encounter. Having said this, the documentation that has been collected also highlights the children's ongoing association and increasing awareness of language in all its forms – be it written, verbal, visual, or gestural, through art, dance, song, line, colour or clay.

In order to deepen the children's understandings of the language that exists within language and it's role in our everyday life, we have asked them to consider the language of some of their passions and other areas we are currently exploring in the classroom (Fig 4). The children were so confident in identifying the languages of these areas that it was a natural progression to revisit earlier discussions about the language within our TN community. The opportunity for the children to reflect on the common language that we had established within our class was a way for the children to recognise the strength of the community that we too had created in the last two years.

So as we move on and the children form new communities in future years, we wonder what aspects of this investigation they will take with them? How will the languages that they have explored and created assist them in their interactions in the future? Will the language created by this class remain with them as a reminder of the strength of the community they have been a part of in the last two years?

The opportunity for us as a community to continuously reflect on our language has played a significant part in creating a strong & unified community.

During a recent discussion the following comments were made by two of the children....

I learnt that if we share [our learning] with other people they can give us more comments for our learning... or questions... And then it can be better to understand it.



Fig. 4

“

I learnt that if we share [our learning] with other people they can give us more comments for our learning... or questions... And then it can be better to understand it”

”

THE RECYCLE CENTRE – A room of hidden treasures...

“ The recycle centre has been part of the every day functioning of the school since the ELC opened eleven years ago. It is a large storage room that houses recycled materials collected for the teachers and children to use in addition to and also in conjunction with more traditional teaching materials in the classroom. ”



The concept was derived from “The Remida Centre” in Reggio Emilia run by volunteers in the community. The idea was to have a centre filled with off cuts and parts no longer needed by businesses that would encourage curiosity and divergent thinking from the children. The parts are abstract and often unidentifiable so that there are no preconceived ideas of how they should be used.

The concept was sound, the space was available but the problem has always been how to maintain, organise and stock the room. Lack of time and manpower meant that the recycle centre never quite reached its full potential so this year, Teacher Helene, the art educator in the ELC invited parents to volunteer to help with the running of the centre.

Three mothers saw this as their chance to contribute to the school in a meaningful way.

Debbie Samuels:

My personal journey into recycling began last year when our class was asked to do a family project involving recycled materials. That was when I began to see the objects we discard in a different light. My family chose to recreate a rainbow and all of a sudden, coloured wrappers, yogurt tubs, bottle tops, drinking straws, texta lids and burst balloons, all took on a new meaning – a new beauty. We ceased to devalue these items merely because of the functions they no longer carried out, but respected and revalued them as items of amazing aesthetics, with wonderful colours, textures and shapes. We became obsessed with collecting them. They provided a world of endless possibilities, you just had to use your imagination.

One of the first truly beautiful items that was sourced for the Recycle Centre was a supply of perspex off cuts. The pieces had a protective brown paper backing which had to be peeled off before the colour of the piece was revealed. Together with a group of children from prep, we spent hours just peeling away. There were piles of white, black and clear pieces and then, to our sheer delight, a beautiful coloured piece would emerge from the pile, as if a precious jewel had been excavated. All the pieces were stored on the shelves and the following day I returned to continue the process. To my horror, all the beautiful coloured perspex had gone. I felt as if someone had stolen a most valued treasure.

I was surprised at my distress and realised that my whole purpose for volunteering for the recycle centre was not for me to hold on to these treasures, but to provide a useful resource for the teachers and children. Now when we put an item on the shelves and find that it is gone the next day, I feel a sense of accomplishment, that the three of us were able to create a “warehouse of wonders” that is both inviting & inspiring, filled with



a plethora of reclaimed materials that expands the repertoire of learning tools available for the teachers and students to explore and investigate.

Monique Gaspar:

Being a new parent to the school and coming from a scientific background, the Reggio Emilia philosophy and the recycle centre was a completely new and unfamiliar concept to me. I wanted to become involved in my child’s education and being part of the recycle centre committee has enabled me to give back to the school and benefit my child as well.

I have been acting as a liaison between various businesses and the Bialik College ELC recycle centre. I use the Internet as a resource to search for companies that have excess, damaged or old stock that they are willing to donate that would normally end up in landfill. Some examples of interesting items collected are metal off cuts, rubber, foam, fish scales, leather, recycled coloured crushed glass, wire hoods from champagne bottles and lighting gels. In addition, we also use the school community (parents) as a further source of materials. Parents are respected and valued as partners in the education process and the recycle room encourages a collaboration between the home and the school.

As I have come from a different education background, this role has encouraged me to appreciate that these otherwise worthless objects foster new opportunities for communication and creativity, thereby reinventing their use and meaning. Not only has it presented new variables and inspiration for the teachers but also it has provoked construction of thinking and problem solving in students. It has raised my awareness of what open-ended materials are and I now look at them in a different light. I realise, that the materials can be presented in so many different ways, initiating many perspectives in each student because each child is different.

Debbie Roper:

I come from a slightly different perspective, that of an ex-teacher in the ELC. I remember visiting Reggio Emilia and The Remida Recycle Centre. It is a place of wonder, a place that ignites thinking and endless possibilities. It is filled with every day materials that have been collected from local companies by volunteers but what makes it so special is the time, dedication and respect that is given to these materials. It is set up so that you want to play, to explore and to touch. This is what I as an adult took away from the experience, so imagine how a child would feel!

I remember returning to school and feeling frustrated. The ELC at Bialik had a wonderful space for the recycle room but lack of time meant that it was never fully stocked or things put away so often it was left for ‘later’.

Now I am primarily a parent in the school and as all parents, I attended orientation evenings at the beginning of the school year. When Helene asked if there were any volunteers to help run the recycle centre, I jumped at the chance. I saw it as my way to help where both the teachers and the children could benefit. I now have the time to help create a space that our school community deserves. Together with Debbie and Monique we too are creating a place of wonder and thought for not only the children but also the teachers. It is an invaluable teaching resource for the teachers as the materials don’t have a pre determined purpose. It is a room that encourages people of all ages to look, touch, manipulate and most importantly think in the most creative ways.

Regular care, maintenance and sourcing of interesting new material have meant that the recycle room is now an integral part of the ELC. Children regularly visit the room with their teachers to collect materials to be used in the classrooms. It is now a space that has purpose and value, and is valued. It is now a room that visitors are shown as part of their tour of the ELC and a place for others to strive for!



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig 1-3: materials used in the classrooms

Fig 4-6: children swapping materials in the recycle center

Fig 7: Collage of materials in the Recycle Centre

References:

1 Brosterman 1997 from Deb Curtis and Margie Carter 2008, *Learning Together with Young Children: A Curriculum Framework For Reflective Teachers*, Readleaf Press, p.54



Fig. 7

“If you compare collecting materials for children to the pleasure of finding a gift for a dear friend you will likely transform the way you view your teaching job.”
 (Brosterman 1997)... and in our case, our view as members of the ELC community.¹”



Bialik College

Main Entrance
429 Auburn Road
East Hawthorn VIC 3123

Phone: (03) 9822 7981
Email: info@bialik.vic.edu.au

www.bialik.vic.edu.au

ELC Entrance
407 Tooronga Road
East Hawthorn VIC 3123

Postal Address
PO Box 422
Hawthorn VIC 3122