

The beauty of a sunflower



'A place on earth is a mosaic within larger mosaics-the land is all small places, tiny realms replicating larger and smaller patterns.....The whole world is a great tablet holding multiple overlaid new and ancient traces of the swirl of forces. Each place is its own place, forever (eventually) wild. (p.27)'

Learning through the arts

THE GARDEN

Recently we made a grand discovery in our garden, a beautiful fully formed sunflower had appeared.

We had nurtured this sunflower from a seed in a pot, and as it grew into a seedling we transferred it into our garden. As the flower further developed we have measured, photographed and drawn this natural wonder. So why was it such a surprise to see the sunflower in full bloom.....

After weeks of rain, we had not made our regular visits to the garden and so through our eyes the sunflowers journey had skipped several growth phases. Therefore as the sun reappeared, the sunflower magically flourished in all its glory through the admiring eyes and wondering minds of our



Allana & Elliot as I arrived at preschool ' Julie Julie, there is a beautiful, magic sunflower in our garden!!!!

pre-schoolers.

We went down to the garden and discussed the flower's existence. It appeared that in skipping several phases of the sunflowers growth some of the pre-schoolers did not have a clear understanding that this was the same plant they had nurtured from a seed. Lankford advises us that with the current condition of our earth we need new generations of earth 'stewards'. These 'stewards' will have an intrinsic understanding and respect for the earth and what it gives us (Lankford, 1997.p.50). Moreover the National Early Years Learning Framework focuses on children understanding the interconnectedness of nature, in meeting Learning outcome two (Being, Belonging, Becoming 2009.p.29)

Therefore as Educators our first step was to determine the most effective and ongoing method to assess and support children's learning within the life cycle of a sunflower and more broadly the interconnectedness of nature. Curriculum in Early childhood is non prescriptive, as effective learning is co constructed between the social and physical environments, relevant to the child's context (Being, Belonging, Becoming 2009 p. 20). Therefore curriculum development requires the support of ongoing learning stories within these contexts. These learning stories focus on the child's competencies, culture, learning dispositions and interests.

Learning stories communicate the child's development overtime and the links between the influences that have supported this development (Hill, 2006.p.25). Therefore these stories support curriculum growth and assessment through recognition and detail to children's voices and lives (Cardwell, 1997, p.113).

As we draw upon children's perspectives, we need to also value individual learning styles. A theory by Howard Gardner (1983, 1994)) recognises these learning styles as intelligences. Some of these learning styles include bodily (movement), logical, visual, and auditory among other areas (Schiller. 2002. P.1).

The arts offer both children and educators multiple lenses into current theories and understandings. Moreover the arts provide a tool or medium for children to interpret the world through their senses. Lankford draws attention to value of the arts in perceiving the beauty of the earth through engagement of the senses (Lankford 1997,p.51).Therefore the arts are a highly appropriate assessment and learning tool in early childhood, as awareness rather than reason guides children's understanding of their world (Wright 1994.p.29). It is through the arts children are offered a variety of learning styles to communicate and extend on current understandings of their world.

Please enjoy the following learning stories through the arts.....

Exploring the sunflower through drawing in the garden

The day after the magical discovery our interest group went for a walk in the garden. We each had a turn discussing the sunflowers unique qualities.....

Elliot: 'It is taller than me and you Julie' we then stood next to it and took a photo. Later loading this photo onto the computer and revisiting the image to gain new understandings (Being, Belonging, & Becoming 2009 .p37.).

Allana: It looks hard in the middle. 'We felt the sunflower in middle it was hard' I explained to Allana that the sunflower grows its own sunflower seeds so it can keep growing new sunflowers.

Hayden: 'It has very big leaves, they feel really scratchy' we all felt the leaves.

Stella: 'I like the yellow' we all discussed the yellow is it light, bright etc, then we gently took a petal each off the flower to explore the colour when we went inside. We talk about not doing this again as it would kill the flower.

Hunter: 'Does it need a drink?' – We often go down to garden check the soil and water the plants if needed. Hunter was drawing on past experience. We all felt the soil and decided all the plants needed a drink so we watered them.

When I asked the group if they remembered planting the sunflower as a seed, only Allana and Elliot said yes, the other half of the group communicated they did not.

Why are these initial conversations important? To have a meaningful conversation or learning experiences with a child, educators first need to know what the child understands or has interpreted from their world. Oken-Wright & Gravett offer that behind a child's first understanding could be a bigger understanding that can be uncovered with the support of more experienced others (2002.p.22). These initial theories were documented on leaves and placed on our thought tree. It was through these theories curriculum is born.

Educators decided to support learning for the rest of the week by giving children ample time to explore the garden freely, engage in conversation and exploration with each other, the environment and educators. This was to support two important goals- a clearer understanding of nature through the senses- and to enable an understanding through sustained exploration. Eisner explains a child learns more effectively through repetition (1985 topic notes).

The week following this exploration the whole class went down to the garden in split groups , but this time with the tools of clipboards quality paper and pastels. Using quality tools within the arts enrich the experience and therefore the learning (Brooks, 2013). There were two curriculum goals within this activity.....

Goal one: to offer a medium to enable children to transfer their immediate or developing interpretation of the sunflower to more complex and scientific interpretations. Vygotsky offers the gift of drawing as a vehicle for learning. Moreover a system for representing children's thoughts (Vygotsky, 1987.p.234). It is through this 'vehicle' educators will gain a second goal.

Goal two: Assessment of children's learning and current knowledge. These drawings alongside conversation offer a window into children's developing theories and knowledge.

How was this implemented?

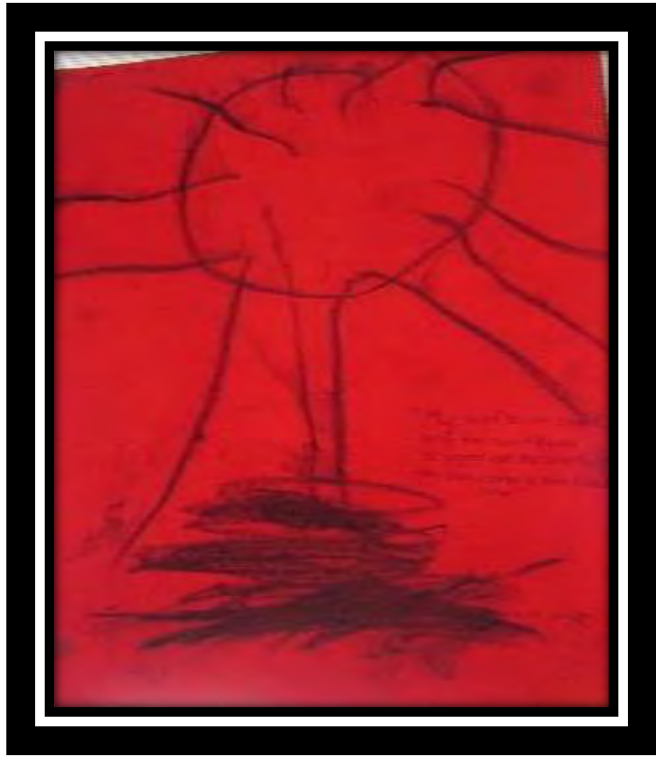
The groups were split so educators could facilitate further learning within the arts, by asking thought provoking open ended questions during the drawing session such as

- I see that you have drawn a middle to the flower what else is in the middle that you can see...?
- I can see you have drawn shapes in the middle of the flower, what do you think they are...?
- I like the way you have drawn the big leaves, I wonder why the plant needs them? - What do you think the plant looks like under the ground?

Children cannot reach their full potential alone they need the influence of a more experienced other (Kindler, 1993).

So what was gained from the lens of drawing and conversations with children? An overall picture that the processes of growing need to be revisited? While the understanding of these processes varied with each individual child there were gaps in the plant growth concepts, overall. As educators we decided to support the learning of the life cycle of a sunflower from the end to the beginning as this was relevant to the children's current context. Please enjoy some interpretations of the sunflower through drawing.....





HAYDEN DEMONSTRATES HIS UNDERSTANDING THROUGH THE ARTS.



Allana's current understanding.



ELLIOT'S CURRENT UNDERSTANDING

So what happened next & why??????

Drama – learning through movement, visual and auditory styles

Drama uses a learning approach which is both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Warren states 'thinking and language are closely linked, language being the tool that human beings use to 'sort out their thoughts' (Bruner 1988:88). Therefore drama manipulates language supporting children to develop understandings as it replicates their real world.

Growing from a seed- We first discussed seeds and the information they contain. A volunteer is then asked to be a seed. The 'seed' first whispers into educator's ear what they are going to become, the child then becomes that seed wrapping their body into a ball on the floor. The educator provokes thought processes within the group by asking questions.....

The way in which children are lead to express their ideas and theories by the educator are critical to the learning processes (Hendrick, 1997.p.19, cited in Schiller)

1/ **'what does the seed need first to grow?'** Child answers dirt then carries out the action of placing dirt on the seed.

2/ **'what else does the seed need to grow?'**, child answers, water etc. Educator extends on this yes water to drink like we do (drawing comparison between all living things).

When all elements are carried out music plays and the seed begins to grow, seed child reveals what he/she has grown into. In addition to this dramatization as a learning tool, was the use of media as children performed growing from a seed, and with their permission it was recorded and played back to them in the afternoon. Educators would stop the recording at intervals asking what is needed next for the seed to grow. **Why??** To revisited concepts through media and build on already developing concepts.

What happened after a week of 'growing from a seed?'

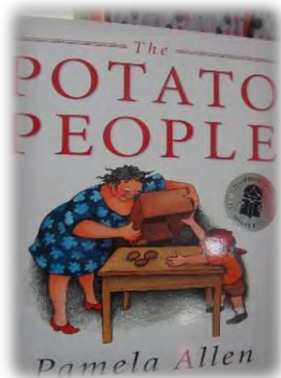
Children were able to relay the basic elements required in the growth process.

Then one day the seed became a turnip!!! This then lead to the enormous turnip, and an interest of how some plants grow above the ground and some under.

A re-enactment of the enormous turnip



As an extension of 'what grows under the ground' we identified with potatoes. The story the potato people by Pamela Allen was read, and soon become a favourite of the pre-schoolers, who requested to make their very own potato people again using the arts to extend on further learning.



Our very own potato people an ongoing project- when they grow 'horns' we will plant them in the garden. We have also placed some potatoes outside to see if they grow horns faster because there it has more light.

.....Meanwhile we continued to explore the garden, ensuring art materials such as clipboards, paper and easels where nearby.

2 weeks on and visits to our garden.....

Revealed

Our sunflower is dying, its vibrant petals have fallen off and its leaves have begun to droop. Allana asked: 'Can I touch the seeds, and have one to plant' Allana is demonstrating an understanding of the interconnectedness of nature.

Elliot asked: 'Can I take a photo of the sunflower' and she did, several in fact. We later discussed the appearance of the sunflower in the photo after we loaded it up on the computer. We were able to compare the different stages it has undertaken through the use of this media. Why did we do this? 'To provide ' a manipulation of labels' across concepts, that promotes a higher level of thinking (Brookes, 2009.p.4). As children express ideas and make meaning using a range of media (Being, Belonging , Becoming, 2009).



Hayden explores the sunflower through touch, Ruby stands alongside him visualising the changing flower, both children are using their own learning styles to build on their theories.

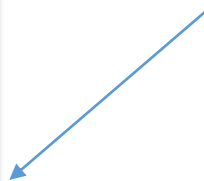
THE SEED



Allana's seed was not forgotten and on return to room we examined it as a group, discussing where it come from, and our future plans for it, we documented these theories on leaves and placed them next to our original theories. We discussed what we would need to support this seed and all children were able to offer their input drawing on past learning and experience. We then planted several of these seeds in our nearby outdoor area. This in itself become an art experience as children decorated boxes to put pots in and made signs for the soon to be seedlings.



2 weeks later



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Together with the children we have developed an Art space – a space where children have time to be explore and extend on learning through the arts, with open ended art materials that are available for children to both access when needed and while they are creating. An aesthetic centre of the room where children can become consumed in their projects and know they do not have to rushed, or suit the thoughts of anyone else. A place where children can be. One of the materials available in this area, is the medium of terracotta clay, and sunflower seeds along with natural tools and materials. Please enjoy the creative learning that takes place.....

LEARNING THROUGH CLAY



These seeds were available on the clay table- influence of both the environment and the educator within the development of learning.

Please enjoy Allana's creation as she applied her theories and understanding of a sunflower through the medium of clay .



Why clay? *Human's first art medium. It is instinctive therefore children naturally relate to this element of the earth. Clay offers us 'its life giving soil' a medium of which to communicate through.* (Kosta, 1999.p.22)

Clay has been available in our art centre for several weeks and therefore most children have become familiar with its capabilities.



As Allana sat down at the clay table, she reached to the middle of the table exclaiming 'these are sunflower seeds!!' 'Did you get these from our dead sunflower Julie?' (*Allana is demonstrating she knows and understands that seeds are specific to what they grow. Moreover she correctly identified the sunflower seed. Allana also identified that the 'dead sunflower grows its own seeds*) Through exploration and the learning vehicle of the arts Allana has develop higher thinking related to the lifecycle of a sunflower.

Allana: begins her project extending on her learning through the medium of a clay. Allana is a visual kinetic learner.

Allana: After making the flowers head which included finely shaped petals and the seeded middle
' I need a stick for underneath'

Julie: ‘ Do you mean the long stem that joins the flower to the roots’ (*extending on current understanding*)

Allana: ‘Yeh the stem’ she finds a wooden stick and adds to the bottom of her creation.

Allana: ‘Leaves, lots of leaves, they have lots of leaves Julie, and they are big’

Julie: ‘Yes Allana, how are you going to make them?’

Allana: Thinks for a while ‘With clay but they are different to petals’

Julie: ‘In what way?’

Allana: As she shapes the clay ‘they are small but big’

When Allana’s creation was finished, she asked how she was going to keep it so everyone could see? I explained that we would find a box and that this clay hardens so it will be able to be kept for a long time. We respectfully displayed this masterpiece to communicate the care, love, learning, and understanding of Allana’s mind through the arts.

Arnheim (1996:113)- *The handling.....is controlled by the inseparable union of watching, handling and thinking. And what is true for the child holds equally for the way the brains and eyes and hands of great scientists operate.*



This sunflower is still growing.....

Revisiting past learning through media

A time lapse video of a sunflower growing from a seed was introduced, the children enjoyed this over several small group sessions. This video brought past learning gained through this project into a holistic frame within in the use of technology. The children were in awe watching it and after communicated their learning through drawing. The higher order thinking was evident within each.



Allana's demonstrates her understanding of the life cycle of a sunflower, within her visual representation of seeds. It is evident her understanding is more complex than in her previous drawing.



Elliot explained that these are that this is the flower that grows through the leaves. Elliot is demonstrating a deeper scientific understanding than she did two weeks ago.



Halle demonstrates an understanding of the necessary elements for plant growth, the sun, soil and sky. Halle has developed deeper thought process on plant growth.



Evident in this drawing is the child's understanding of people and nature, can work together. Note people looking after plants.





Hayden's picture offers a comprehensive scientific understanding- as he draws the person watering and caring for the flower, the sun, the soil, the roots system, petals and leaves. Hayden understands the interconnectedness of nature. Hayden also demonstrates a more complex higher order thinking about these scientific concepts, than he did in his previous drawing.

I hope you have enjoyed our story 'learning through the arts'. Moreover have gained an understanding into the powerful gift of the arts in children's learning during early childhood and throughout their lives.

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