

Healthy Hearts, Bodies and Minds: The Garden Project.

A Project undertaken by the children, staff and parents at a 24 place kindergarten/ pre-prep. on the Darling Downs in Queensland.

Creating Aesthetic Environments

'Having a sense of the beautiful; characterized by a love of beauty' (Macquarie Dictionary 1997) is the dictionary meaning of aesthetic. It would seem then; that a learning centre or space for children should be readily able to provide this type of an environment that stimulates the senses and provides opportunity for exploration and discovery. But all too often with the introduction of corporate childcare centres and austere regulations from state and national bodies we are seeing the emphasis shift towards more sterile, less aesthetic environments that can be easily cleaned and are full of mass produced brightly coloured plastic toys purchased from toy catalogues:

...one is struck by the profusion of colour, the furniture, equipment, the play materials are in the primary colours: red, blue, yellow, plus green, and sometimes orange. Pastel colours are usually reserved for infant's toys or possibly girl's toys (Tarr 2001: online).

The use of these types of materials and equipment in early childhood centres is not only prescriptive but it does not allow for creation and imagination to emerge the way that they would in a more naturalistic and aesthetic environment. This view is endorsed by Greenman (1991 cited in Schiller 2000:178) where he reminds us that 'beauty is important because we feel better in beautiful places. We often feel ennobled, special, more at one with life'.

One would be imprudent to suggest that by simply having a centre full of natural articles and equipment that the environment will be aesthetic. Rather, it is the

consideration that is given to ‘the structures, choice of materials, attractive ways in which educators set them up ... [which provides for children] an open invitation to explore (Gandini 1998:162-163). Aesthetic environments, do not merely include children’s artworks, but rather feature their work as a part of the everyday environment. Artworks are displayed with thought and care and show an appreciation of the time and effort that each child has put into their work. These works of art are individualistic and value the process of art rather than the final product. They may include works in progress, completed works and works that represent and value the different stages that children are at:

Art that shows samples of children’s work at different stages of development indicate the teachers believe in providing children with an unstructured, developmentally appropriate art program, one that allows the children’s art development to unfold naturally (Frazer & Gestwicki 2002: 218).

Spaces for children to participate in and initiate their own art experiences should be available at all times during the program so that children are free to express themselves through different forms of art when the need or desire arises not just at set times prescribed by the teacher. These spaces can be enriched by the addition of colours, textures, natural fragrances and music and the provision of choice of materials that are readily accessible by the children.

Further, all spaces in the environment should serve a purpose. Spaces that are purposefully set-up should provide stability for the child but also be flexible enough to allow for change. These spaces are evident in the schools of Reggio Emilia whereby the environment is referred to as the ‘third teacher’:

The environment...is full of variety, with large spaces and small spaces, spaces for building, for dancing, for pretending, for talking, for wondering, and for reflecting...Each space and each small

corner of every space has an identity, a purpose, and it is cared for and respected by children and adults (Cadwell 1997:92).

It is important when establishing these environments that there is consideration of its purpose, so that the space is not only accessible to children and adults but also encourages participation and is stimulating and engaging. The philosophy of the centre should be the foundation for the establishment of all environments:

...to inhabit the space according to philosophical choices that respect children transforms mere hygiene into genuine care and transforms interactions with objects into communication. Without a philosophical basis that gives meaning to the educational experience to be lived in a space, the identity of the space will not emerge; in fact the risk is to try to live and experience disconnected from the space (Gandini 1998:166).

If we are to create purposeful, aesthetic environments in early childhood centres then we must develop a strong philosophy that is enabling of these spaces. We must also enjoy solid foundational understanding of Vygotsky's social construction theory whereby 'children become knowledgeable and are able to give meaning to their world by negotiating meaning with others' (Mac Naughton & Williams 2004:214). In this sense the emphasis is not on the individual child as a detached being, but is viewed in relation to other children, adults, the environment around them and their social and cultural history. So by creating these thoughtful, purposeful and aesthetic environments we therefore play an essential part in the creation of the child's identity.

The Catalyst

The concept of Healthy Hearts, bodies and minds was born from a mini maths project that took place earlier in the year with the children growing beans from seed. A few of the children had been sick and a discussion arose amongst a small group of four and five year olds about how 'those children needed to eat more fruit

and vegetables 'cause that's what makes you healthy. These beans are healthy aren't they' (Eliza 4 years). I then entered the conversation and a discussion evolved around the different things that can make you healthy. The final consensus by the four and five year olds was that good food, exercise and lots of sleep 'so your body and mind can grow' (Ben 4 years) is what make you healthy. During morning discussion the children were asked what they thought were the most important things for a healthy body, heart and mind. A mini mind map evolved resulting in the children deciding that being healthy and happy were the most important things.

As the arts would be an integral part of this project we the staff decided to choose one particular work of art that could evoke a feeling of health and happiness. Fortunately, the work that I found is a 1986 oil painting titled 'Still Life' by Australian artist Margaret Olley and one that I feel beautifully epitomises health and happiness.

Project Goals

The overall goals for the project were:

- For the children to deepen their understanding of the value of art as a tool used for communication and expression
- To broaden the children's knowledge and understanding of methods of keeping ourselves healthy by posing questions, and investigating through research, exploration and discovery.
- For children to share the creative process with other children, teachers, parents and members of the community.

- For children to experiment and represent ideas utilising many forms of creative art including drawing, painting, clay modelling, drama, storytelling, dance, music and poetry as a part of their symbolic language.
- For the children to develop an appreciation of the arts
- For the children to develop aesthetic awareness
- For the children to utilise all aspects of indoor and outdoor environments as a part of their project.

Integrated art forms

There were countless opportunities for the children to utilise many different art forms as a component of the project including pencil sketching, crayon rubbing, pen drawing, clay modelling, collage, painting with acrylics and water colours, mask making, storytelling, drama, photography and dance. This will be explained more thoroughly in the following sections of this assignment.

The Project

The Organic Garden (one part of healthy hearts, bodies and minds)

Project commenced the middle of August 2007

As a follow on from the bean project that had taken place earlier in the year, the children decided that they would like to grow some more vegetables in a 'real' vegetable garden. I was very keen for the children to pursue this area of interest but was also very aware of the necessity for the children to be involved in the whole process and also for them to understand the possible inhibiting factors that could affect the project. So a pre-project meeting was organised for the staff to discuss the possible pros and cons of the project and the availability of 'primary

sources of information and opportunities for fieldwork' (Chard 1998:14), and to develop a topic web to determine possible starting points for the project.

Phase One

The first stage of phase one was to determine the knowledge and experience that the children had already had with vegetable gardens. This was done initially in small group discussion time where the children were able to tell stories about gardens they may have at home or have seen elsewhere. Most of the children had gardens at home and some had vegetable gardens that they were actively engaged in caring for. Other children spoke of not having yards to have a garden but that they had pots in their kitchens or verandas for herbs. Although the children's knowledge of different types of gardens was extensive, most of them were more familiar with flower gardens rather than vegetable gardens.

The children were then invited to draw memory pictures of vegetable gardens that they had seen and some of the vegetables that were in the gardens. The children have an arts corner where they can choose their own tools however paper and lead pencils of different thickness were already placed on the tables and in the clipboards.

The information from the storytelling and the drawings was combined and displayed on a whiteboard and the children were brought together again to discuss or draw/write anything further that they would like to add.

As there were some children in the group that were not familiar with vegetable gardens the group discussed ways that more information could be found out about vegetable gardens. The question was 'how can we learn more about how to make a vegetable garden?'

There were many suggestions from the children including asking parents and grandparents, using the internet, watching 'Backyard Blitz', reading magazines and books, going to the library and looking at other people's gardens. The children were encouraged to pursue their own path for a day or two and then the group participated in a field trip around the block behind the kindy.

Phase Two

The first part of phase two involved a walking excursion (also part of our healthy bodies, hearts and minds project) whereby the children would walk through the local park and past houses in the neighbourhood to see the different types of gardens that people had in their homes.

As this was the first walk outside the kindy for the children we decided that we would not take any art materials so that we could concentrate on safety and observation of the surrounding environment. The children were encouraged to walk in pairs with one adult for each couple of children so that they could encourage and scaffold children's conversations. There was much discussion and storytelling after the first trip and the children were able to ask different questions and extend their knowledge and express themselves through the use of drawing on clipboards on the 2nd field trip. Other children took baskets to collect leaves, twigs and feathers that were found during the trip that could be used for collage upon return to the kindy.

Displays with books, posters, prints, vegetables and fruit samples were set up for the children to explore and use for research. Displays were also set up for the children to use as stimulus for their art works such as the pumpkin display below.

During this phase the children had the opportunity to watch an episode of 'Gardening Australia' where a children's organic garden was being set up in a schoolyard. Incorporating the ideas from the program with the gardens that the children had seen and drawn on their walk, they were then invited to design their own garden using the medium of their choice. Some children used acrylic paints or whiteboard markers, some children used wooden blocks, some of the children worked independently while others worked collaboratively on their designs. At the end of the session the children were encouraged to discuss their designs with their friends and teachers and to look at the designs that other children had made. There was much discussion about materials and costs and which design would be the most appropriate for the kindy.

The last stage of phase two involved the children participating in a gardening workshop with Josh Byrne from the ABC Gardening Australia program as a part of the communities 'Carnival of Flowers' festival. This event was open to the community and gave the children an opportunity to talk about their plans and ask questions of an expert. Some of the children were also able to participate in the parade that opens the carnival each year. There were many different types of music and dance groups for the children to see. The children were also able to witness some beautiful costumes and floats that had been designed and put together by people within the local community.



One of the areas of concern for the children was how to ensure that insects, birds and lizards did not eat their vegetables and herbs. A discussion ensued whereby the pros and cons of animals in the garden were compared. We talked about companion planting, scarecrows, plant friendly insects and butterflies. Fortunately the consensus was that the children would plant enough food so that there was plenty for people and for the bugs and that we would plant marigolds that act as a deterrent to insects and plants that would encourage butterflies and birds. Lots of strawberries in the backyard would hopefully encourage the bluetongues to stay away from the vegetable garden in the front yard.

One of the boys in the group decided to make a bird mask 'I'm going to pretend to be a bird so the birds know we're not going to scare them'. This encouraged some of the other children to do that same and a play and musical experience evolved.

Phase two concluded with the children displaying their designs through wall displays, table displays and an album that included photos that the children had taken and had enlarged, work samples, mind map and other special events that the children shared during the first two phases of the project.

Phase Three (Concluding the project)

The conclusion of the garden project occurred with the creation of the garden beds and the planting of the vegetables and herbs. Of course the garden itself is ongoing and the children receive much pleasure from spending time in the garden and being responsible for it's care. Six weeks after the children planted the first seedlings they were able to harvest their first vegetables and herbs and prepare and cook their first meal of spinach, green bean and pine nut rice. The children have discovered that they planted too much spinach and are looking at the possibility of setting up their own market stall of an afternoon when the parents arrive. This should in turn lead to endless possibilities for a new project.

Assessment

Assessment in project work is an ongoing process that can be seen in the documentation of children's work throughout the whole project and when the children carry their knowledge from one environment to another. An example of this is when the children designed and made their bird masks, performed their own play and choreographed their own dance to a piece of music titled "Minoeska". The children have chosen to perform this dance for the parents at the end of year break up party rather than perform Christmas songs and dances that really don't relate to anything that they are interested in at the moment.

Assessment has also come form general discussions that the children have had with teachers and with each other and also from the information that the parents have shared...

‘ Eliza has never eaten spinach before and after she helped to grow the spinach and then cook the meal at kindy, she has asked if we can make a vegetable garden at home so she can grow her own vegetables’ (Eliza’s mum, Geradine).

Assessment should not just be something that occurs at the end of the project in a particular format. Rather it should be included as a part of the process of the project that shows the children that their efforts are valued:

Assessment is an intrinsic part of documentation and therefore of the entire approach of what we call *progettazione*. In fact this approach becomes something more than a prescribed and defined procedure; it is a procedure that is nurtured by the elements of value that emerge from the process itself (Rinaldi 2001:87).

By teachers interacting with the children and scaffolding their learning along the way, they are able to gain a valuable insight as to the knowledge and the understanding that the child possesses and has acquired throughout the experience.

Conclusion

As an early childhood teacher I have found this whole experience tremendously rewarding. The feedback from the children, parents and other teachers at the kindy has been nothing but positive. The parents and teachers have all established their own vegetable gardens at home and this ranges from pots on a balcony to a whole backyard being turned into a vegetable garden. This project has enabled so much learning and beginnings of new projects that the children (and families and staff) are so keen to get underway. I have learned to value the children and their opinions so much more and do not hesitate in throwing seemingly unsolvable problems in their direction. Keeping the momentum and

interest in this project was never a problem and as big as it was it is just a small part of our big 'healthy hearts, bodies and minds' project that is underway at the moment.

We have been using the 'project approach' at the kindy for three years now and find that it will always be a learning process for all parties involved. The use of the arts as a tool is perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of project work as it enables children to use art to express themselves in a way that is valuable and meaningful.

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