

Provoking Surprise and Uncertainty: a Disposition of Mindfulness.

Reflections from the teachers at Greerton Early Childhood Centre through their Centre of Innovation (COI) research project

Editor: Lorraine Sands



In a 21st century world that is full of Surprise and Uncertainty, as change is exponentially thrust upon us, the work at Greerton Early Childhood Centre is based on a view that successful learners will be those who see the world as a place full of possibilities and pursue these with effort and passion.

Surprise and Uncertainty

Surprising and uncertain situations are perhaps the most telling because as learners react to ambiguity the dispositions that drive their responses dictate their ability to be spontaneous, creative and flexible. Costa & Kallick's thoughts surrounding flexibility in learning have supported our research at Greerton. They write that,

"Flexible people seem to have an almost uncontrollable urge to go beyond established limits. They are uneasy about comfort; they 'live on the edge of competence'. They seem compelled to place themselves in situations where they do not know what the outcomes will be" (Costa & Kallick, 2000, 34).

Other writers (e.g. Holland et al. 2001, p.15) have written about learning as 'improvisation', and Margaret Carr has commented on the value of the Jazz Musician as a metaphor for a learner (M. Carr, lecture *Four metaphors for learning*. ELP Lecture Series. Auckland, 2009).

During the Centre of Innovation project a paper from Ritchhart & Perkins (2000) provoked us to think about 'mindfulness' and its dispositional role in opening possibilities and opportunities for all participants to puzzle over, explore, investigate, research and build working theories about their world. They argue for a disposition of mindfulness to be embedded in settings.

"The research on mindfulness reveals many promising practices for addressing these broader agendas and improving education. However it is not enough to simply overlay a series of discrete instructional practices on teachers' existing repertoires. For mindfulness to be embraced by the educational establishment as a worthwhile goal, these practices must have a meaningful and long-term effect on students' learning. It must take hold in classrooms in ways that permeate the lives of both students and teachers. Only by developing a disposition towards mindfulness can we alter substantially the educational landscape of students" (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000, p. 29).



The teachers at Greerton have intentionally worked to embed this kind of approach deep into the fabric of our learning and teaching community and as a result we see children continually stretching their abilities. Expectations are high as children initially watch more practiced experts leading the way, practice self set goals themselves and hone their skills as they push to the outer limits of their comfort zones.

Mindsets

The writings of Carol Dweck (2006) have also influenced the practice at Greerton. She writes about learning dispositions in terms of 'mindsets'. Carol Dweck describes children (including 4- and 5-year-olds) as having developed a general orientation towards 'performance goals' or 'learning goals'. We have really tried to understand what this all means for it has very serious implications in terms of the way we offer feedback messages to children about their burgeoning skills as well as their attitudes to learning.



When children are oriented towards 'learning goals' they strive to increase their competence, to understand or master something new. They attempt hard tasks, and persist after failure or setback. When they are oriented towards 'performance goals' they strive to gain favourable judgements or to avoid negative judgements of their competence. The aim is to be seen to be competent or good, and difficult tasks where the outcome (achievement or failure) is uncertain, are avoided.

'Learning goal' children hold incremental beliefs about ability, goodness or intelligence (it can be changed by effort): a growth mindset. 'Performance goal' children hold entity beliefs (ability or intelligence is a fixed trait, a static entity): a fixed mindset (Dweck, 1985, p289-306).

Margaret Carr (2001) added a sociocultural frame to this viewpoint on learning, concluding that incremental or entity beliefs appear to be socioculturally and historically linked, and emphasising the role of the centre as a 'dispositional milieu'.

At Greerton, teachers have worked to protect and strengthen mindful and open-ended social identities. We have been challenged by notions of the teacher's image of the child, of their views of themselves as learners, of our concepts about how learning occurs and the teacher's role in enhancing or constraining learning. Carol Dweck's (2006) views on intelligence have made us rethink the ways we promote learning. The idea that intelligence is a growable commodity and that building competence is dependent on children's own view of themselves, has changed the way we teach and learn.

We seek to nurture children's dispositions so they stretch their abilities and respond in resilient resourceful ways, particularly to experiences that are surprising or uncertain. This means supporting a community of learners who relish challenge and take managed risks. We see children continually setting their own goals and through effort and practice, sheer grit and determination achieving those goals. Our research shows that children in this type of learning environment set harder goals and stay interested, involved and socially engaged for long periods. They often start as a learner and then as their expertise grows, they offer their knowledge and support to help other children learn.



Putting theory into practice



Threads of Inquiry: Greerton Early Childhood centre of Innovation Research 2006-2008

These are just some of the theoretical constructs underpinning our practice with relation to managed risk and challenge. In fact all of the 'Treads of Inquiry' resulting from our COI project work together holistically to inform our practice. This is driven by a collegial view of 'learning community' that sees children's and teachers' intentions listened to and acted upon with responsiveness and reciprocity. We want our environment to be one full of surprise and uncertainty as children set themselves interesting challenges that stretch their abilities. This means that teachers 'manage risk and provide challenging provocations' and it requires moment by moment assessment to ensure children's safety. We rely on teachers' professionalism and strong collegial discussion to determine this risk assessment. A list of rules is insufficient to cover every situation and in fact would not place the emphasis on ability. Rules so very often stifle innovative exploration.



Provocations from teachers are most often born out of 'deep listening' to children's interests. The climbing wall is a particular example of this.



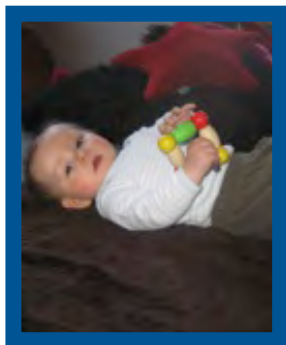
How did this interest start? Children wanted to climb and they kept practicing their ideas, much to the concern of teachers as we assessed that many of their attempts were at the edge of what felt comfortable to us. Yet teachers continued to listen and to think about possibilities that might fulfil the goals children set. We had already cemented a culture of saying 'yes' to children, which meant that we thought about the ideas children offered and provided the context, resources, time and space for their ideas to widen and deepen through exploration (Greerton Early Childhood Centre, 2010).

We know that when children build their ideas about risk and challenge they start from where they feel comfortable, then stretch the edges of their competence. They practice.



Working together

We think the teacher's role is a **supportive one but not a rescuing one**. We therefore do not make tasks leap from easy to hard without the graduated practice required in between. For example: We would not place children into positions they cannot get out of themselves, especially babies into sitting positions, toddlers in swings, toddlers in higher places like the top of boxes via easy stairway access.



We work as a team and discuss all aspects of risk and challenge with each other. This is essential to ensure that we use each other's perspectives to analyse risk assessment appropriately. In this way we are not acting alone but with the combined experience and expertise of the team. We also seek expert advice from the community. This was evident throughout our learning journey around the climbing wall. For example: Several teachers were experienced in rock climbing. Even so, we still sought advice from the rock climbing specialists at Mt Maunganui Rock Wall Company with reference to rock holds and harness equipment, and techniques for belaying. We purchased these from specialist shops, all the while gathering information to ensure our own expertise was growing.

Documentation

We continue to document our learning and teaching as we remain reflective and thoughtful about the ongoing experiences we offer children. This documentation and our informal discussions ensure we work in partnership with families. In this way we keep in sync with each other in terms of managing risk and enable families to extend their children's experiences outside of the centre. Likewise, teachers are able to build on

children's experiences at home and continue extending these at the centre.

Learning Stories especially provide opportunities to place reflective comments inside contextual practice. We unpack dispositions as we keep asking ourselves: 'What happens to our practice and our settings when we truly consider what it means to be a robust and resilient learner – a learner who is a curious explorer of their world?' We think the possibilities are full of surprise as passionate learners take risks, puzzle over, investigate and build working theories. We now have an embedded culture where teachers and children teach and learn together as we stretch our imaginations to build collaborative learning communities where children have the support, inspiration and passion to 'fly'.

We are always thinking about how we might extend children's experiences and risk and challenge are areas of great interest to us. Teachers take a very responsible stance on risk assessment and we manage this to ensure children's safety but we will not shrink from offering challenge as children face exponential change in a twenty-first century world. They must be 'crew members' not 'passengers' in order to successfully negotiate this new world (Claxton, 2004). Risk and challenge in meaningful contexts are essential elements in this process.

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For more information about Greerton Early Childhood Centre: www.earlychildcare.co.nz

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