

Mud, Glorious Mud

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“As a child, one has that magical capacity to move among the many eras of the earth; to see the land as an animal does; to experience the sky from the perspective of a flower or a bee; to feel the earth quiver and breathe beneath us; to know a hundred different smells of mud and listen unselfconsciously to the souging of the trees.”

-Valerie Andrews, *A Passion For This Earth*

Baby boomers are probably the last generation to have run wild in the woods and paddocks, freely exploring the nearby creek bed, or building huts and tree houses in the outdoors. Tamariki born after 1980 seldom hear the words “Go and play outside.” With few exceptions, theirs is a contained and constrained generation, with little direct experience of the natural world. Today when they do spend time outside it is more often than not organised by adults.

Research is telling us that tamariki have better motor coordination, greater attention capacity and increased ability to cope with stressors in their daily lives by interacting with the natural world (Migliarese, 2008). There is also emerging body of evidence demonstrating a link between experiences in the natural world and the conflict resolution skills, motivation and self-efficacy of tamariki.

We need to remember that tamariki learn with their bodies before they learn with their minds. In my view, a healthy mind is the product of the brain and the body working together in perfect harmony. With many of our tamariki spending a significant part of their lives within early childhood environments it’s imperative that we get the ‘mix’ right ensuring that not only do our outdoor environments reflect what research is telling us but that our attitudes towards the outdoors do too!

In a workshop I’d held - based on Robyn Lawrence’s article *Learning to Move: Moving to Learn* (Lawrence, 2011) - I’d shared with the group how in a centre I had worked in we had removed a gazebo that resulted in a large expanse of dirt being exposed. As our teaching team struggled to reach a consensus on how to best utilise this ‘space’ and develop a final concept, our tamariki began to make decisions about its use for themselves.

The words of Malaguzzi (as cited in Edwards, Gandini, & Foreman, 1998) resounded in my mind. He talks about the environment being a space:

We value space because of its power to organise, promote pleasant relationships between people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promote choices and its potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning.



Here was a space within our own environment that was providing opportunities for tamariki to make changes, while at the same time promoting opportunities for making choices and it was sparking all kinds of social, affective and cognitive learning!

Within days this space evolved into a BMX track, a project completely driven by tamariki as they dug holes, built mounds and placed tires, working collaboratively to create more and more complex tracks. Rules were developed, boundaries established and relationships grew as they challenged themselves and their friends over and over again, mastering each new track they had created.



When the rains poured down filling the holes that had been dug it became a mud pit, providing hours of deep engagement as tamariki immersed themselves fully into the experience. These tamariki were in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as 'flow'; a state where they are completely focused, motivated and fully immersed. The signs of flow were easy to see - that "feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task." (Golman, 1995, p. 91).



The space transformed once again, this time into an obstacle course as tamariki quickly began to place planks, tires and stones in, around and over the puddles to enable them to traverse, with and without their bikes, the now more complicated course. This offered challenge, problem solving and the opportunity to develop so many dispositions.



How were the guiding principles in our curriculum document, *Te Whāriki*, being honoured in the play that was taking place in this area? Were we providing opportunities for open-ended exploration and play? Did tamariki have appropriate and interesting play materials that they could change and interact with? Was there active and interactive learning opportunities, including opportunities for tamariki to have an effect and to change the environment? And were they able to contribute their own special strengths and interests? The answer was a resounding YES!

Ann Pairman and Lisa Terreni, in their article *If the Environment is the Third Teacher What Language Does She Speak?* say that

[T]he early childhood environment gives children important messages and cues. In other words, the environment 'speaks' to children - about what they can do, how and where they can do it and how they can work together (Terreni and Pairman, 2001, p. 1).

What are the messages and cues our early childhood environments and our responses to those environments sending tamariki? What might hold some teachers back from embracing learning experiences in areas such as these? We were certainly aware of how powerful this piece of dirt was becoming; the sheer number of tamariki engaged there daily, spoke volumes. It was now even more popular than the sandpit!

As the teachers in the group shared with me their thoughts on the roadblocks to such experience happening within their own settings, fear of parent reactions seemed to loom above the rest. They were stopping their tamariki from these wonderful learning experiences because they would get wet, muddy or dirty and parents would complain about the number of clothes they needed to launder. Are we not failing as educators if we are not prepared to be advocates for our tamariki? We need to support parents in understanding the benefits of nature play, as well as the risks of not allowing it, to bring them on board.



Richard Louv is the author of *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*. In this book he investigates the relationship between tamariki and the natural world. He created the term "nature-deficit disorder" to describe possible negative consequences to individual health and the social fabric as children move indoors and away from physical contact with the natural world. He is convinced that early nature experiences are essential if we are to produce tomorrow's creative thinkers and change agents. He asked his teenage son to compile a list of biographies of those he calls "the famously creative." What a wonderful eclectic list he compiled: Science fiction author and futurist Arthur C. Clarke, whose budding cosmic consciousness was awakened by childhood bicycle rides

under starry skies; a two-year-old Jane Goodall, best known for her 45-year study of social and family interactions of wild chimpanzees in Tanzania, sleeping with earthworms under her pillow; Thomas Edison who, as a very young child was found sitting on a clutch of goose eggs, hoping to hatch goslings. Others who made Matthew's list were Samuel Clemens (better known by his pen name Mark Twain), T.S. Elliot and Eleanor Roosevelt. It is research such as Louv's that practitioners can use to support their cause in helping to develop parents understanding (Louv, 2010).

For me, artist Martin Hill comes to mind when I think of famously creative New Zealanders. His ephemeral art is awe-inspiring. He says "I work in nature because we are nature, my materials come from the earth to which they return, learning to live by nature's design is our only hope for the future." (Hill, 2010).



There is currently a wonderful movement in the New Zealand early childhood educational community that is emphasising the need to connect back to nature. Based on the Forest Kindergartens of Europe (a type of preschool education for tamariki between the ages of three and six), these Kindergartens that are held almost exclusively outdoors. Whatever the weather, tamariki are encouraged to play, explore and learn in a forest or natural environment, with adult supervision to assist rather than lead. Centres such as Fiordlands Kindergarten have made a conscious decision to get their tamariki back out into nature, whatever the weather! Their mantra is "There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing and footwear." They recognise that you can't expect the next generation to love nature without letting them experience it. They are really just turning back the clock 30 - 40 years to how we grew up! (For more information on Fiordland Kindergarten's experiences see their blog <http://fiordlandknaturediscovery.blogspot.co.nz>).

These early childhood centres offer educators an opportunity to think outside the box or literally outside the centre, and envision a dramatically different style of education that emphasises direct experience, self-directed inquiry, teamwork, and self-reliance. Through experiences such as those at Fiordlands Kindergarten, educators are supporting growing knowledge of brain development, linking to balance and cerebellum in the

brain. Professor Peter Strick, Ph. D's research has traced pathways from the cerebellum to parts of the brain involved in memory, attention, language, emotion, decision-making and spatial perception. The deduction is that the cerebellum, the part of the brain that processes movement, also has a function in processing learning. These centres are also supporting tamariki in connecting to the world around them, allowing them to become responsible for their world.

For those centres that aren't there yet, you can reflect on how you can truly transform your early childhood environments into the third teacher. I believe for this to happen practitioners needed to let go of the power!

In Book 2 of *Kei Tua o te Pae*, Caroline Gipps argues for assessment opportunities and relationships that are based on power with, rather than power over, tamariki and Rose Pere points out that assessment within a Māori context is closely linked to the teacher-child relationship. Teachers and learners working closely together are in the best position to jointly evaluate the ongoing process. (Ministry of Education, 1996)

The experience at my centre highlighted to me the need for teachers to reflect, both individually and as a team, on how they meet the principles in *Te Whāriki* within their outdoor environments. The outdoors should provide new experiences rather than just replicate those already available inside. Shouldn't it first and foremost offer our tamariki freedom to move, make noise and mess?

I leave the last word to Lella Gandini who says

In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible: it must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up-to-date and responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge (Edwards et. al., 1998, p. 177).

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