

An Ordinary Moment - Extraordinary Possibilities.

Several years, I was asked, by Dr. George Forman, Professor of Education at the University of Massachusetts, to be involved in an educational research project based on the following concept.

- *To write a book that provides case examples and commentary on how teachers from different cultures take an ordinary moment in the classroom, reflect on its significance, and then find ways to build that moment into an extraordinary learning experience for the children.*

I was very excited about this prospect of being involved in research with other international educationalists and to be able to study an aspect of our programme that would assist us with our own development and understanding further. It was an exciting challenge that would benefit our children and teachers, so I asked one of my four year old teachers at the Patey Street Preschool to share this experience.

What is an 'ordinary moment?'

Ordinary learning moments are occurring, frequently, throughout the course of our daily programme and can be something like this –

“Two children are playing outside and notice a line of ants making their way across the sandy ground. One of the children takes a stick and etches a groove in the sand that crosses the ant’s path. Then both children look very closely at the ants to see how they adjust to this ditch’ across the ant trail – a teacher witnesses this episode and realizes the children are fascinated with this tiny world of motion and are curious about what the ants can do in the face of this obstacle.

The teacher stoops near the children and listens to their comments and adds comments of her own, such as ‘Oh, that ant is trying to carry a leaf over the ditch’. The teacher hurries off and returns with several magnifying glasses for the children to better observe the ants.

One girl thinks that the ants are talking to each other. The teacher asks what the little girl saw that made her think that. ‘See, they touch each another’s noses. That’s how they talk’. ‘I wonder if they make noise when they talk?’ the teacher responds, inviting the child too more fully develop her idea.

Over the next several days the children continue to wonder about the ants and to formulate theories about how they communicate. The teacher pays close attention to the children’s thinking, restating their ideas (‘So when the ants rub noses together a little sound comes out?’), providing new materials that allow for further investigation (paper to draw their ideas, magnifiers, clay to create a 3 dimensional representation, a microphone for listening to ants), or asking a well formulated question that supports the children in their deepening exploration (‘Do you think we could understand their talk?’). The children continue to observe the ants themselves as a source of information instead of going directly to books or just asking the teacher.”

Or in the case of younger children it could be –

“A two year old is trying to reach a towel that is draped over a tall gate. The child asks for assistance from the teacher who sees the value in asking the child to look for a solution.

‘Hmm, what might you do to reach the towel?’ the teacher asks. For the next ten minutes the child tries various strategies including standing on different chairs, swiping the towel with sticks and shaking the gate.

The teacher supports the child’s efforts with encouraging words and steadying the gate when needed as the child climbs. Eventually the child figures out that she could reach the towel with a combination of standing on a chair and extending her reach with a stick”.

As you can see these teachable ordinary moments are different in their degree of depth of study, for example the second one is a moment where a teacher sees that a child can develop a skill and think and explore different theories and find a solution in a very short time, whereas the first example is open to more in depth study and could easily lead onto the children investigating other ideas/theories they may have about ants.

Our ‘ordinary moment’ we discovered.

Our ordinary moment was captured whilst a group of six children got themselves involved in the block area. This was before the class meeting time, when the children are free to choose what area of the classroom they would like to be in. One of the girls had started to build a tower using two very long blocks and continually felt frustrated, as they kept falling down.

The teacher asked what she was trying to build and was told that she was trying to make them stand up, but they wouldn’t. This activity went on for quite awhile, with several of the children putting forward their ideas/theories for how the blocks could be made to stand up. – *“maybe we could use glue... what about supports... what about different types of blocks... “*

Amy the little girl who had started all of this exploration off, decided that cellotape was what she needed to use for her to be able to build up high and so therefore went and got some. She experimented with this but still met with unsuccessful results. As teachers, we could see that something exciting was happening here and decided to revisit with this group of children after class meeting time.

We discussed with the children in class meeting time what we had observed that morning in the block area and listened carefully to what conversations evolved from this. Many ideas were revisited and as a result of this several different types of tape were now placed into the block area for them to use - a child had suggested earlier that morning that the tape was not wide enough, so that was the reason that the tape and blocks had not worked!.

What we observed next was the children actively using the different tapes, but deciding to build their structures low and along the ground instead of high, so that they would be successful. As teachers, we decided that we still wanted to challenge the children to build high and we wanted to see them using some of their ideas/theories that they had expressed earlier, so we met together to discuss and develop a planning of possibilities and opportunities of where we could go from here. Over the course of several weeks, we revisited with the children, using the video camera film footage and photos that we had been taking of their exploration and discovery of building towers. We also made available various expressive mediums for them to experiment with. Throughout this time, we were excited about the children’s thirst for knowledge and how they had collaborated with each other about their ideas. Finally as a group, we decided to choose one child’s design and to work from that, due to the fact that we were starting to run out of blocks!

At this stage, the children involved in constructing the design, chose to build the tower as high as they could, so with the help of the OHP we projected their design onto the wall in the classroom. Much discussion was had about this larger image and the children decided that they wished this to be built outside for all of the Bear Park Family to enjoy.

Gus, the centre handyman, was invited in to assist us with the purchasing of the materials, the sawing, the hammering and the building of the frame for this creation that they had chosen to reconstruct outside.

The language, the maths, the technology and design that developed, as part of this study was truly amazing.

Conclusion.

What we discovered as teachers was how creative and thought provoking children were - from something that can happen at anytime, an in depth study can so easily evolve.

Children were able to be risk takers, to express their ideas to others and justify why their idea/s were sound. They were able to learn to listen to others ideas, to argue and agree with others suggestions and to experiment and explore these ideas further.

What I witnessed was how in tune the teachers were with the children in their group, how they listened attentively to what the children were saying and how they provoked and questioned the children to encourage them with their thinking.

This truly was a partnership of learning.