

## **Communities of Learning in Early Childhood Education: Supporting Reciprocal Relationships with Refugee Parents.**

Paper presented at the CLESOL conference, Auckland 2-5 October 2008

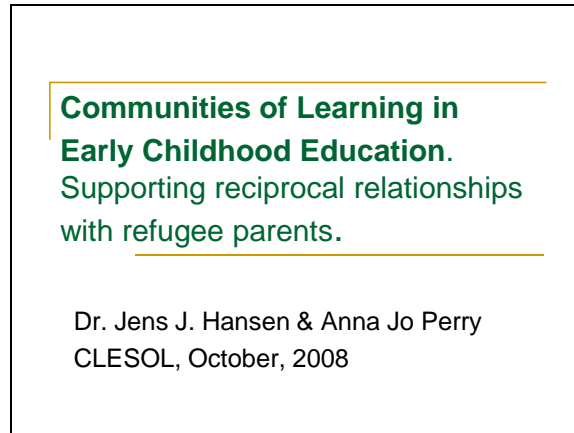
People create stories to explain and make sense of their environment and events within it. In early childhood education in the Centre for Refugee Education, Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, Auckland, these stories, from past and present fulfill an important role. Through them, teachers and parents share previous experiences which impact upon and are reflected in the planning and the assessment of children's learning. This paper examines visual depictions of story episodes and how appreciation is deepened through photographic image de- and reconstruction. A series of photographs of early childhood situations were presented twice for interpretation, first, as 'gestalt' images from which written interpretations were obtained. Second, a 'visual grid' was introduced for the same pictures which prompted greater attention to particulars and enabled computer analyses. This approach heightens interpretation and centralizes parental involvement. This 'novel' approach to qualitative research is a valid 'method' for teachers and researchers alike.



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Slide 1



**Introduction**

People create stories to explain and make sense of their environment and events within it. In early childhood education, therefore, reflective practice and learning stories fulfil an important sense-making role. This paper examines visual depictions of learning episodes within stories and considers how appreciation is deepened through photographic image de- and re-construction for subsequent in-depth analysis. In the original reconnaissance<sup>1</sup> phase which preceded an ongoing doctoral study, a series of photographs of early childhood 'situations' were presented two times to subjects for interpretation.

They were presented, first, as 'gestalt' images and accompanying written interpretations were obtained. In the second showing, a visual grid was introduced over the same pictures. This prompted subjects to pay much more attention to particulars, thus facilitating a deeper (visual) understanding of the photographs. The visual grid, therefore, served as a powerful aid that enabled multiple observers to discern, distinguish and comment in greater detail upon a series of images.

In another stage of this reconnaissance phase of the doctoral project, a series of photographs of children engaged in activities in the Early Childhood Centre, Centre for Refugee Education, were shown to refugee parents. The photographs were of the children of the refugee parents and they (the parents) were then asked to interpret what they saw. The process was then repeated with the children who were asked to describe what they saw. Finally the teachers

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<sup>1</sup> An important point to make here is that the original study was commenced by Perry, with guidance from Hansen, as a teacher/researcher. Subsequently, when a doctoral thesis proposal was developed, a series of (ongoing and, as yet, unresolved) negotiations commenced with the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

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added their interpretation of the events depicted within the photographs, thus forming a much more robust picture of the child's learning episode<sup>2</sup>.

It is contended first that this piecing together of multiple perspectives with the accompanying value and honour given to the people who engage in them is a marked feature of the Community of Learning in the Early Childhood Education Centre (ECE) at the Centre for Refugee Education (CRE). Second, it also has become clear that through this both perceived and experienced valuing and honouring of personal stories and experience there is a marked effect on the relationships that form and the individual identities that are shared.

One of the most well known Maori proverbs asks "He aha te mea nui" "What is the most important thing?" and the answer is "He Tangata, he Tangata, he Tangata". "It is people, it is people, it is people". Communities of learning or communities of practice as they are now more frequently called reflect this with their inherent commitment to, and emphasis on, the importance of people and their relationships to each other within a community as it develops. In this presentation we describe such a community of learning that develops for every intake of refugee families who participate in the Early Childhood Centre within the Centre for Refugee Education, Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. It is a community of learning where each person is sometimes teacher, sometimes learner<sup>3</sup>.

Within this particular community of learning, as with every such community that develops, it is the relationships between the participants that are of the most importance; they are begun, nurtured, encouraged to evolve and grow at the CRE and they typically thrive beyond the CRE. These relationships, even within the short, approximately 26 days of the programme, are intense and long lasting and are crucial to the refugee families developing understanding of their role in supporting their children's present and future learning. This is so because:

"...we come to each new inquiry field living our stories. Our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. Their lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue...Their institutions and their communities, their landscapes in the broadest sense are also in the midst of their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 64)"

Stories which we tell to others in order to explain who we are, or in order to relay prior experiences, reflect our early socialisation within particular cultures and societies as well as the reservoir of experiences we've had during our lives. All such stories are uniquely different and their very distinctiveness affects present and future ways in which we make meaning from new

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<sup>2</sup> Again it must be emphasised that this 'reconnaissance phase' was conducted by the ECE teacher with guidance from her doctoral supervisor as an investigation conducted by the 'teacher as researcher'. Such research is also referred to as Scholar Practitioner Research and involves a partnership between teachers as practitioners and scholars as researchers.

<sup>3</sup> This statement of "sometimes teacher – sometimes learner" was embodied within the former National Council of Adult Education manual for the training of adult literacy tutors. We have not been able to source a reference as the NCAE no longer exists.

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situations. Importantly, how we learn from such stories is crucial because it influences the nature of programmes we offer our students and impacts upon the ways in which we offer them. Clearly, therefore, how we make meaning from unique stories becomes an important consideration with respect to how individual programmes of learning are framed for the children we teach. Equally, they have considerable bearing upon the ways in which we prompt parents in supporting their children's learning; making meaning from stories thus moves beyond using only one interpretation of each teaching and learning moment!

Coming to this conclusion was the one of the major outcomes of a short professional (teacher practitioner) inquiry we undertook in 2006. We wanted to look at the logistics of using and analysing photographs in research with consistency. We wanted to assure such rigour across a large group of photographs and with multiple revisits over time. To that extent, we developed a new approach to using software (QSR NVivo) for recording our analysis and we initiated procedures for testing inter-observer reliability (Hansen & Perry, 2006) Specifically, as the project developed we came to ask if we were actually seeing what we were describing in the analysis of each photograph or was what we thought we were seeing the result of being privy to particular (emic) professional knowledge. To test this we gave a sample of the photographs we had taken in the study to four other people each of whom was familiar with the early childhood education context in different ways. We asked them to "write what you see" and interestingly, the similarities in what they actually could see and wrote about were very small indeed, i.e. there was a marked absence of concordance between their reporting of what they thought they saw.

Being aware that the refugee families have had experiences which differ significantly and profoundly from our own has had some very important implications for the ways in which we conduct assessments and introduce educational planning procedures at the Early Childhood Centre; what we see and write about as teachers may not necessarily be consistent with what was actually happening for the children. Moreover, when we put the pictures and stories on the wall for parents to see, what we displayed might not be what they, the parents, perceived either. So we took the somewhat unusual but imminently sensible step of asking them! We were met by responses that were immediately intense and deeply thought-provoking. This presentation describes our responses to this very startling recognition.

Slide 2

This presentation focuses on:

- The varying *contexts* of refugees;
- Introducing early childhood education to refugee families;
- Highlighting the issues with 'learning stories';
- The 'Jigsaw Effect' project;
- Continuing the project: using the visual in supporting refugee families;
- Where to from here?

As indicated in the slide above, this presentation focuses on four dimensions. First, we explore the varying contexts within which the very different experiences occur and out of which stories develop for the children and parents we work with in a temporary community of learning and practice. Second, we comment upon the time constraints of the Mangere programme which demand *ipso facto* that the most targeted of teaching be undertaken in order to meet the very specific but wide ranging needs of refugees. Third, we want to share the background to our on-going project-journey, and further developments that have arisen to date; some moments of real sharing have taken place between the refugees and the teacher as researcher as we have extended the concept of collaboratively shared learning stories for educational purposes. We will conclude by considering some fresh questions that have arisen during our further investigations of what we now euphemistically refer to as the 'jigsaw effect'. These concluding questions are important because they are informing us about ways through which we can extend the project.

Slide 3

The context

- Who are the refugees?
- What is the upon arrival programme?
- What are the TESOL challenges?

Refugee families come to New Zealand in six groups annually. They come for permanent resettlement to Aotearoa New Zealand from refugee camps that have been established in countries from across the globe and from first countries of exile. Sometimes as offspring, they have been spared the experiences associated with initial reasons for leaving homelands because they may have spent all their lives dwelling in camps and/or countries other than their original homelands.

When they arrive in New Zealand they are brought directly to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre where they spend their initial six weeks. The early childhood dimension of the programme in the Centre for Refugee Education introduces the children to education which is provided for zero to five year old age group and also gives parents experience in supporting their children's learning within the expectations of the New Zealand context.

However, too many of the families that come to the Early Childhood Centre, the concept of separating, from their children at this age and leaving them with comparative strangers (albeit for a tiny flicker of two hours or so of time) is completely alien. Indeed, the challenge of coming to terms with the very idea of an education programme that is aimed at very young children is also completely foreign to them.

Clearly, therefore, the processes of initiating and building trust as well as developing reciprocal relationships between the teachers and family members are of vital importance. At Mangere, we have come to see this as best happening within a community of learning within which we are all members. Relationships are thus more than vital, they are of paramount importance! The ethos of the community is that we are brought together first as human beings,

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sharing ourselves whilst actively listening to others. And then, as we feel comfortable and safe, we become able to share our knowledge and our stories.

Central to this idea is the notion that we are all social beings and that we create meaning in our lives through our ability to engage successfully in the world in which we live (Wenger, 1998). Refugee families by virtue of their arrival into Aotearoa New Zealand, enter a very different world than that to which they were accustomed. Challengingly, they are expected to 'engage successfully in it' their new unfamiliar world. We reason that learning to succeed is less overpowering in a community of learning where the emphasis is on belonging, doing, experiencing and becoming (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). This also reflects Bishop's (2003). research in which he discusses the importance of teaching and learning situations where the role of teacher and student can be dispersed differently at different times, where each is, in fact, sometimes teacher, sometimes learner.

### Slide 4

#### Introducing early childhood education to refugee parents

- A totally new concept for most;
- Hands-on, experiential learning;
- Taking up the challenge new roles and approaches to ECE;
- "Mastery experiences" and asking your own questions for understanding ECE and language acquisition.

As noted earlier, the concept of an education programme existing for the zero to five plus age group is often completely new for refugee parents. As also noted, the idea of parental separation from children at this age may also be quite new and often very bewildering. But these matters must be balanced with the parents own learning needs. This means that showing parents the routines of the programme and including them very strongly from the start is vital, especially during the first few days.

However, the idea of learning within a community environment is often a very familiar concept for refugee families. Often, as children grow, parents, grandparents or others in the immediate community show children appropriate skills; they teach them how move their hands

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into the right places, to talk about what they are doing, to follow certain rules of procedure or etiquette and so on. At other times, parents may sit and talk about events that have happened, thereby helping children to make sense of things as they narrate their stories and listen to the responses and questions of their listeners. Such processes are very much oral and practiced within communities of commonality.

At the same time as they are either learning or further developing their English language skills, parents must also begin to come to terms with, and begin to master, what may be an altogether new set of roles and responsibilities. In many of their countries of origin, these parents did not play a large part in their children's learning as manifested from within the formal schooling system. However, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the opposite is in place. Expectations are placed on them from schools and from early childhood education settings that they should assume partnership roles in their children's educational endeavours and journeys. Hence, having clarity about these roles and being able to work through expectations and practices with some level of success has important implications for parents and children.

### Slide 5

#### Learning Stories

- The traditional format;
- A new approach to learning stories;
- Using a visual language;
- Relating this to language acquisition.

The usual format of 'learning stories' (Carr, 2001) is that teachers write the 'story' of a learning event for an individual child or children and may or may not add digital photographs. These stories include some indication of how this event can be developed into further activities meant to further stimulate the children's thinking and interest in the area. A point of concern with this is that it is *the teacher's* interpretation, based on *their* previous knowledge and experience. This issue is greatly amplified at Mangere because the children speak many different languages and more often than not there are no interpreters available to ask the children what they are

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actually doing which means that the teacher's interpretations have no checks and balances. On the bottom line, this means that planning that flows from a particular learning episode for a particular child and which is based on only one person's interpretation could be (and often is) outlining a follow-up path that is not about the child's true strengths and interests

At the same time, whilst being ever mindful of the severe constraints on the availability of interpreters, the teachers at the CRE have worked at developing a system of assessment which is cognizant of all of the children's prior learning events. They have developed such assessments in ways that are fully inclusive of parents who may not understand English well or even at all.

With regard to this paper, for instance, teachers now take a series of digital photographs of children engaged in the different areas of the Centre for use in assessment and planning<sup>4</sup>. These are then displayed in the centre for parents to see. The photographs invariably delight parents and initiate conversations between them and/or their children. Parents are then able to ask questions that are valid for them personally; questions based on their previous knowledge and experience, rather than being determined by teachers choosing what they think the parents need to know. These questions may come initially through interpreters but as relationships grow and trust forms there are tentative attempts at using English or at teachers answering them in their first language. When these events occur, they are seen by refugees and teachers as immensely important because they represent members of a community of learning and practice assuming control of this small area of their new lives.

From this work, we have come to consider additional perspectives to learning stories. The photographs that we once put straight up on the wall and left for the parents to consider now travel a different and far more direct route. Instead of one set of photographs there are now three. The teacher's story of the actual event comprises one route; the second route, with the help of interpreters writing in English and translating the child's first language, tells what the child wants to say about the event. The third route, again with interpreter help, involves gathering the thoughts of parents and caregivers with respect to what they see. These thoughts can involve parental interpretation of events that have happened at the CRE, or can flow from commentary provided by parents and caregivers about previous experiences which they have lived. Alternatively, they may comprise comments about what their children are doing. We have found that far more often than not, what the teacher's thought that they saw and subsequently wrote about is far, far, far from what the child was actually doing. In other words the validity of what the teachers were writing was flawed. Importantly, having recognised this, we now know that there

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to note again that this paper is reporting a *teacher as researcher* project, a study which predicated a doctorally framed study into, amongst other things, new ways of seeing in ECE. That ongoing study, as noted earlier, is currently having iterative forays into the gauntlet of gaining AUTEK approval.

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are many perspectives involved the stories that can be ignited by photographs and hence, the potential for achieving rich and valid interpretations greatly expands.

Slide 6

Multiple perspectives and interpretations

- Stories are very individual they highlight who we are, our identity;
- Stories begin from and are interpreted by previous personal experience;
- Interpreting and assessing without a common language.

The admission, acceptance and addition of unique refugee perspectives incorporates the idea that each person within this community is sometimes (possibly we should say 'often times') learner, sometimes teacher. These moments of sharing of past experience, personal stories and flashes of insight represent points at which real learning takes place. This kind of learning is not just about the accumulation of knowledge, but rather, about appreciations which precipitate understandings which initiate personal change and growth. They involve moments of contemplation and reflection as well as understanding and valuing the importance that must be attributed to individual backgrounds for it is these antecedents which determine how we see the world. These moments of appreciation are usually, in our experience, filled with laughter, our laughter! Ours, though, is often laughter of embarrassment triggered by our realisations about just how wrong our assessments have been and just how far away from the real interests and strengths of the children a programme can become removed.

As these pictures and stories are often very proudly displayed on the wall, they draw in other refugee families who may not have early childhood aged children. Almost invariably, the conversations and questions then cross sector boundaries and incorporate other stories so that the ensuing kaleidoscope of interpretation within this community of learning moves and grows as it manifests meaning and learning. All of this can happen with the minimal of a common language, relying heavily on the power and impact of the visual.

Slide 7

The 'Jigsaw Effect' Project

- What do we actually see?
- What are photographs?
- How do we differentiate what we actually see and our interpretation?
- Do we all see the same thing?
- An example...

Everyone sees things differently. Even if we are all inspecting the same object at the same time or the same images at different times, or the same event from a range of locations, our perceptions of what we see varies enormously for such is the uniqueness of human interpretations. Indeed, the fickle variability of our reconstruction of that which we think we see is what renders us human (if you 'see' what we mean). This then, along with the matter of how refugees tell their stories and the significance of how those stories relate to their children's participation in early childhood education, is an important dimension of what this paper is about. It embodies our thinking about ways of seeing but it does so in ways which are far from complete. It represents how we are beginning to address the challenges of seeing. We need to do this in order to more validly portray jigsaws of reality, in order to accord dignity to phenomena that surround us and the people who construct those realities. As facilitators of social analysis, we need to know about such matters so that we can help people tell their stories. We want them to become empowered to achieve this as research partners – we want them to construct their truths and help us to learn from them.

As we see images and events, we begin to create stories in order to explain to ourselves and others what we think is happening. However, what we *think* we see, and what we *think* is happening are strongly influenced by prior experience, by our early socialisation, our values, beliefs, judgements, and aspirations. In fact, every part of who we are influences each small step in our *individual-sense-making-journey* (Berger, Blomberg, Fox, Dibb, & Hollis, 1972). In our increasingly high-impact visual world, the force of what we see is brazenly apparent even though we are frequently oblivious to what we see. This is so because of the impact of sensory overloading, a reality documented by Georg Simmel as early as the eighteenth century (Fletcher, 1971). So what are photographs? At a very cursory level, they are an image of something that

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is, or a capturing of something that *was*. Perhaps we can even think of photographs as representing their own reality – as fresh representations that *ipso facto* assume a validity of their own (Edwards, 1992).

Irrespective of this, whenever we take photographs, our pictorial framing instantly becomes at once a construction and an interpretation; a glimpse of our own and also someone-else's reality. In other words, a photograph is socially constructed (Becker, 1979). Equally important is the debate about whether or not photographs are data in themselves or are instead a way of *storing* information that can be analysed in order to create data (Emmison & Smith, 2000). In our view, a photograph represents a source of information in its own right from which data can be extracted; it is, in effect, a latent data source which invites interpretation. The outputs of that interpretive exercise become data.

But whilst in research we invariably have a predilection for completing analyses, ensuing stories are not necessarily just about what has been found, but equally, can be concerned with what has *eluded* researchers. Hence, we concur with Becker (1979) who reasons that it is also important to consider as we look at an image that has had a frame put around it, what is *not* taken and why. At the same time, we must beware of chicanery because the electronic technology that is now available allows those who are adept at such things, to construct images of events that never happened at all! What cameras capture can be converted into lies. Digital enhancement, like plastic surgery, has the capacity to mask reality to such an extent that truth becomes thwarted. But that is not our focus here. Our centre of attention is in uncovering the truth within images and mirrors, not on distorting and fracturing them.

In looking at what photographs are, we also need to question for what purposes were they taken. At a personal level, they record and recollect significant events and people...birthdays, weddings, holidays, visions of those who are precious to us. These images prompt emotions and typically trigger some degree of thinking. Hence, photographs contain the core of stories we can tell in order to unlock meaning. But as we've indicated earlier, we live in an era of visual surfeit<sup>5</sup>. We are all, routinely, quite aware (yet blissfully ignorant) of the almost overwhelming presence of images in our everyday lives. They are just there – everywhere. We accept that they are there in abundance and yet we are, somehow, inured to them. We do not allow ourselves to become visually intoxicated.

There is a danger in this. If we have become habituated to visual overload, then we must remove ourselves from such torpor in order to be able to see effectively whilst we analyse information in order to convert pictorial information into visual data. We reason, therefore, that in

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<sup>5</sup> We comment again that Georg Simmel saw the city of the eighteenth century as providing a sense-deadening excess of stimuli and similarly, in the early half of the twentieth century, Louis Wirth noted that we become inured to visual abundances. Thus, if sensory excesses deaden our capacity to discern, we must be vigilant as researchers.

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order to be visually discerning, we must not only be vigilant as to the potency of the visual, but we must also seize opportunities to become informed by those who are a part of the images we are contemplating analytically.

Notwithstanding all of these points, photographs are an important information source in qualitative research. Anthropologists have known this for a long time and have routinely used artefacts to ply their discipline (Collier, 1979). And in education, during teacher initiated learning moments, pictures are routinely used to encourage children to discern. However, in social research, and in particular in educational inquiry, we are suggesting that this is not enough. Authentic *in situ* photographs are a platform for unlocking stories.

### Slide 8



Some readers will know that this view represents the image that welcomes refugees to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. For those of us who have known the centre for a while, there will be a realisation that this is actually a *good* picture. Gone are the gravel track and car-eating potholes. However, it is still perhaps not the most welcoming sight we could wish to provide. Nevertheless, at some of the refugee camps in Africa in particular, the United High Commission for Refugees' representatives and the VIP's stay in converted containers. It is where the food and water are, but more importantly, it's where the safety is. Thus if we look again at the photograph and we bear this piece of information in mind, the picture has the capacity to be perceived very differently. The point we are making here is not rocket science. We are proposing that how we see an image is conditioned, to a certain extent at least, by prior information. Beauty, or at least safety, really may be in the eyes of the beholders.

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Slide 9a



Slide 9b



Looking at these two photographs, how, if at all, are they now different? How do you see the photograph before we introduced the grid? What interpretations did you contemplate for the first photograph? What difference, if any, did the introduction of the grid make? Given that you now have nine smaller photos, how might you now view this picture? How might you now interpret it in order to generate qualitative data?

You might, for instance, notice the woman sitting... is she, perchance, the hostess? Would the matriarch be standing at this type of function....perhaps then, she is not the 'grand' mother? Does the fact that the woman standing has a coat and hat on (when the other two women don't) mean that she is freshly arrived? Or is she departing?

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What feelings, if any, spring from this photograph and are encapsulated within the overall frame? Does the gestalt convey formality, comfort, lots of money, a by-gone era, a sense of propriety, of values and places for everything (the child is sitting away from the table, not up to it)?

Did you question the age of the photograph at all? Perhaps you knew the scene? It's from the screen play of *'A room with a view'* by E. M. Forster (with the screen play by R. Jhabvala, 1986). Did you see the clues which enable you to conclude that this was 'shot' in quite contemporary times, for example, the road in the corner, the child's hair style and so on? With no pun intended, we simply say – you get the picture.

We realise that in leading you through this exercise, we are using the photograph as a heuristic, as a device for conveying meaning. The 'actors', and again no pun is intended, are separated from us by time and space and that separation is the determinant that initiates this kind of approach. However, as will become apparent, our key message is that when actors from photographs are present, as can be the case in research, we can and should involve them in the story telling process.

### Slide 10

The response...

- Involving the parents in the story;
- A partnership of ECE planning which also prompts language acquisition;
- Relationships.

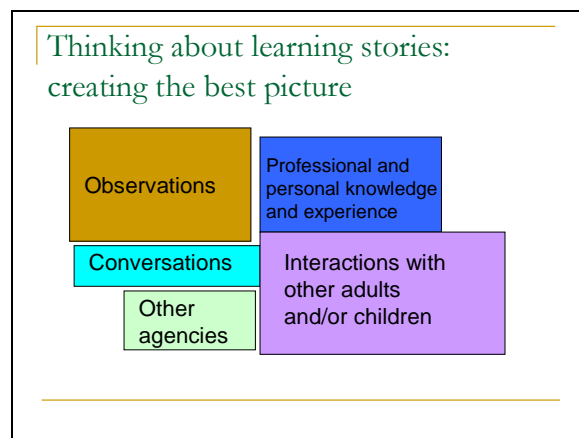
To facilitate this involvement of 'actors' in research, we decided to take the bold step of asking the people who'd been photographed to tell us about what was going on. Specifically, this meant that we asked not only the children but also the people who had the background knowledge about the children and the photographs to make more pertinent inferences.

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The first time we trialed this gave rise to a moment of intense learning; a moment of great meaning-making that involved and amazed the parents of the child who had been photographed. Specifically, we had spent the morning in the sandpit where, whilst the water trough was filling, one of the children lined up buckets along the edge of the sandpit. Each was very carefully placed and where there was danger of spillage another was placed to catch the water. We took a series of pictures as he did this and noted the story as it was unfolding. At morning tea we showed the photographs to his father and told him, through an interpreter, what had happened. He sat, silently listening, and after a moment looked up and said “How could he know that, he was just a baby”. Upon probing further, we were told that this was how the family had lined up the buckets before they drew water from a well. All of the parents who were present looked at the pictures and talked about how children learn at this early age. The interpreter wrote the story in the first language and then in English as the father spoke about it. As a footnote to this story, the interpreter came to tell us that as they walked back to class the father kept repeating his amazement that his son had known how to do this. In the following days the conversation and questions about how children learn continued and the parents all paid great attention to the pictures. But importantly, they had triggered important adult learning about the education of their children and how their children grow, learn and develop. This, then, became one of those moments of realisation and learning we cherish. Afterwards, and as a result of this experience, the relationships we had been slowly developing suddenly began to grow with great speed. The parents could see that their culture and their experiences were valued and their children’s skills were accorded great importance by the community of learning and practice that was in operation.

Slide 11



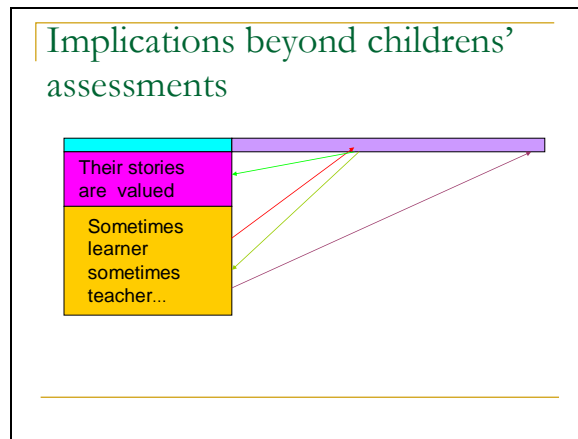
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Sometimes children who come to the early childhood centre have had access to some of the resources that are used in ECE, for example, they have seen and perhaps even used scissors or balls or pencils. But more often than not, they haven't. Despite such divergence of childhood experience, the job of the teachers is to build up a full picture of each individual child; their strengths, interests and development. Often this knowledge comes in small parts and is then assembled to build a picture. There are two useful analogies we have employed in trying to explain what teachers seek to do. The first involves the idea of piecing together a shattered mirror in order to try to construct the best picture possible. We might, therefore, use observations derived from both inside and outside of the Centre. The second will be introduced in a while and refers to first impressions.

And not all 'picture' elements are visual in this case. For example, there are many conversations between ourselves and the wide variety of other people who have come into contact with the child in other contexts within the resettlement centre. We continuously become privy to informal knowledge about families and their backgrounds from other agencies and we also have access to formal information sources. These information snippets are in effect, seamlessly blended with our professional knowledge of early childhood. Typically, experience of working in early childhood education also plays an informative role as do the interactions that occur between the children and their teachers. Each transaction adds a piece to the developing picture. Sometimes the fit of each piece isn't exact; sometimes it's a very small piece of information. But each piece of information adds something and has the potential to become data when the information becomes analysed – by the teacher! To that end, it's important to realise that while there may be snippets of information which have been provided by many people, it ultimately remains the responsibility of the teacher to interpret and assemble those pieces. Pieces of information, therefore, are brought together by the teacher in whatever form they consider to be valid. And such perceptions of validity are *etic* in nature, that is, they are based upon the personal early socialization and later experiences of the teacher looking in. But more and more as we observed, we became increasingly aware that this *etic* approach was not necessarily valid. We did not necessarily know what the children were doing in their play and we realised that many of our interpretations were likely wrong or if they were not completely incorrect, they were at least contestable.

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So if we then reject (or at least question) the picture of the child we have been developing through our Eurocentric eyes; if we contest each of the small pieces of information that have been used in order to assemble a two-dimensional teacher compiled image of the child, it becomes possible to argue that the emergent picture is invalid. And if we turn such a composition on its side, and ask parents what they see, it becomes clearly apparent that there are other possible pictures which might be much more valid. We can in effect, achieve an entirely alternative understanding.

Such an understanding was made very clear recently. One of the children had been playing with the play dough all morning. She made small balls and then spent a long time flattening them out with her hands until they were very thin. She then put them on a plastic saucer and transported this to the play oven where she immediately turned the play dough over. She had been repeating the process over and over. When her father came to pick her up for lunch we showed him the evidence and the photographs at which he laughed and said "She is making our bread". He explained how it was made and cooked and how it was used. The whole family returned early after lunch and the mother very expertly, using the play dough, showed us how she made the bread using a rolling pin and the flat of her hand as she moved the dough round in a circle. Both parents were smiling broadly and were clearly very proud of their explanation. And equally, they were clearly proud of their daughter. The next day as the families gathered at morning tea, both parents were talking and laughing with the others a lot more than before. The fact that we had been students learning about the importance given to bread in their culture was a levelling experience.

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Where to from here...



- What do you see?
- Differences in what is seen first occur because that reflects what is most important.

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The third phase of this project again stemmed from our professional expectations. In responding to our question “what do you see in the photograph” participants talk first about the things that are most important to them. If we look at this photograph perhaps we would think to talk about the filled buckets. Perhaps we would talk about learning to count, the question that has elicited the thoughtful expression on the little boys face? Would we immediately say that the child looks happy, involved or engrossed in what they are doing? The points that we notice first in looking at photographs give us clear evidence of what is important for us as individuals and as parents. They also give us pointers in guiding parents to support their children’s learning, through the way we write learning stories in the language we use in conversations with parents and children.

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Implications

- A real partnership in ECE and language acquisition;
- Authentic stories for growing language;
- The importance of valuing the ‘person’;
- The issues of only one perspective in learning stories;

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## Communities of Learning in Early Childhood Education: Supporting Reciprocal Relationships with Refugee Parents

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To conclude, this project has shown us as teachers the possibility of developing a 'true' partnership with the parents and children both in terms of early childhood education and in language acquisition. The stories that are now developed to showcase the children's learning are clearly much more authentic, much more 'real' and this valuing of the 'person' has a ripple effect in the lives of the refugee families. For early childhood education the clear value of lessening the issue of a single perspective for our learning stories, especially in our fast growing multi-ethnic communities, affords some important points to consider. We have nurtured this project with growing excitement at the new learning and real sharing we have begun to experience and we move into the next phase with equal curiosity. Watch this space...

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