

## FRIENDS ON THE FARM - RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BUILDING THROUGH THE ARTS

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### ABSTRACT

*Increasingly, the notion of inclusive practice is challenging teachers to consider ways in which curriculum frameworks can cater for learning about the differences that exist within the community. This paper reports on a funded community project that brought a group of four- and five-year-old preschool children together with adults with disabilities to explore relationship building through expressive art making. An examination of the program and its outcomes highlights the value of arts based teaching and learning and reflective practice as an approach that supports mutually respectful relationship building between children and adults with disabilities. Extracts from journal entries are used to exemplify the 'lived experience' of this unique community arts project.*

## INTRODUCTION

Most would agree that attitudes of bias towards disability and difference are deeply embedded in our culture and for many early childhood professionals, the challenge of developing a curriculum that is inclusive and fosters positive attitudes and behaviors to difference continue to stimulate debate. The notion of inclusion is based on the recognition of individual needs and the celebration of difference and for early childhood professionals it is helpful to broaden this definition to include the idea of the removal of barriers to learning for all teachers, children and families (Connors & Stalker, 2007). Postmodern theory, with its emphasis on 'uncertainty, complexity, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and temporal and special specificities' (Dahlberg et al., 1999) provides a platform from which teachers can promote and construct inclusive pedagogies suitable for early childhood settings; pedagogies based on beliefs and practices that acknowledge social justice, fairness and human rights.

Going hand in hand with inclusive pedagogy is the connection to socio-cultural theory where learning is understood to be influenced by relationships between people, contexts, actions, meanings, communities and cultural histories (Edwards, 2003), and is concerned with meaning making and inquiry processes that occur on three interacting planes of influence, including the intrapersonal (i.e. the individual child), interpersonal (interactions among social partners) and community/institutional (contextual) (Rogoff, 1984). Construction of knowledge is seen to be influenced by active participation in real- life situations within community and it is timely that Nimmo (2008) draws our attention to the need to involve our youngest citizens in democratic life as both 'participants and contributors' and for teachers to consider more complex possibilities for practice by including diverse cultural and social perspectives.

Linking inclusive practice, socio-constructivist theory and arts based teaching and learning may be considered uncharted territory for some early childhood professionals. However, in the case of community arts projects, a nexus between these ideas is uncovered; one that is both accessible and capable of integrating a diverse range of participants in collective and collaborative creative processing. Involvement in the arts can be considered as a form of 'cultural communication' whereby individuals of different ages or cultures, as well as those with disabilities, can come together in an atmosphere of mutual respect to honour the differences that exist.

Traditionally the arts have been recognised for their capacity to enhance the wellbeing of individuals by providing a means of expression – sometimes a means for which there may not be words. They are also seen as essential vehicles for 'personal and collective improvement' (Okuyama, 2001) and contribute to the soul of the community by representing the link to internal thinking processes that allow for the expression of thoughts, ideas and emotions. Arts within the community are concerned particularly with providing opportunities for expression of social minorities or sub-cultures; whether for people with disabilities to support communication and expression, for disadvantaged people to express needs, for minority groups to sustain and reinterpret their cultures or for young people to make sense of their lived experience. Such opportunities contribute to the establishment of social cohesion by bringing individuals together in neutral spaces where friendships can develop in an atmosphere of partnership and cooperation.

This paper, drawing on a research into inclusive and reflective practice, demonstrates the impact of a community arts program as a vehicle for successful reciprocal relationship building between a group of preschool children, and adults with disabilities. It examines the nature of the 'lived experience' of the participants and with the support of journal extracts presents an insight into what was felt and learned throughout the project. The paper

concludes with some questions for teachers and other community members who share an interest in community arts projects.

## THE BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

'Friends on the Farm' was a funded community arts project that was designed to support the ideas of social inclusion and citizenship through participation (Nimmo, 2008) by bringing together a group of four- and five-year-old preschool children and a group of adults with disabilities, to explore relationship building in a community context, this being an inner city Children's Farm. The rationale for the project was based on the idea that participation between these diverse groups would pave the way for the recognition of difference, similarity and diversity, for the establishment of new forms of 'talk' that incorporated inclusive language and action and for relationship building that was authentic and meaningful for all participants.



*Figure 1-authentic relationship building*

This rationale was premised on a commitment to real life experiences that reflected principles of human rights, social justice and inclusion rather than exclusion (Gunn et al., 2004). Of particular relevance were the Guiding Principles that underpin the Victorian State Disability Plan 2002-2012 that promotes the Principles of Equality, Dignity and Self-Determination, Diversity and Non- Discrimination (State Government of Victoria, 2002). This plan articulates the vision that people with a disability should be able to live and participate in the life of the community with the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities as all other citizens. It also outlines a vision for local communities; one that advocates for people to have a sense of belonging, to be valued for the contributions they make to the community, to have individual rights respected and to be able to take action if discriminated against.

Most importantly the plan promotes the idea that individuals should be able to contribute to community with a shared sense of responsible citizenship through participation in all aspects of community life.

During the planning stage of the project, teachers, disability development staff and artist/teachers met regularly to establish goals and program content, discuss teaching strategies and address how the physical needs and safety of the children and adults would be met, especially in regard to wheelchair and walking frame access. In an attempt to ensure that meaningful relationships had every chance to develop it was agreed that the program would aim to meet criteria identified by Nimmo (2008) namely:

Intimacy: Will the relationships between participants include care and concern?

Continuity: Will the relationships be developed through opportunities for multiple contacts over time?

Complexity: Will the relationships have the potential to engage the participants' curiosity and imagination?

Identity: Will the relationships offer the participants insight into their sense of place and belonging?

Diversity: Will the relationships stretch the participants' understanding of human diversity?

Reciprocity: Will the relationships strengthen the teachers', disability development staff's and artists' image of the participants?

The 'Friends on the Farm' project could be categorised within the genre of phenomenological enquiry with the systematic record keeping and ongoing critical reflection between the teachers, artist/teachers and the disability development staff providing an opportunity to uncover the heart of the experience itself and gain insight over time into the developing relationships and collaborative learning. The project was documented using descriptive methods (Paton, 1990) with teachers, artists and disability development staff taking on the role of participant observers who did not attempt, 'to classify, compare groups, explain, predict or make judgments' (Hawke, 1993, p.10) but instead aimed to broadly identify the key recurrent themes (Burns, 1994) and 'essences of shared experience' (Patton, 1990) that were indicated by the child and adult responses. In line with Schön's (1983) ideas associated with 'reflection-in-and-on-action' the program leaders became deeply engaged in the experience, finding time for ongoing individual and collaborative critical reflection (Larrivee, 2005), a process that involved a week-by-week review of the program and a re-shaping and re-building of the teaching and learning approaches based on the evaluation. Journal notes, program plans, written observations, participant art products and photographic and video documentation informed the critical analysis.

## **ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS**

The 'Friends on the Farm' Project brought together a diverse group, including

- Twenty 4- to 5-year-old children attending a long day preschool in inner city Melbourne, Australia and their three teachers,
- Fifteen adults with varying physical and intellectual disabilities enrolled in a creative arts program offered by The Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE, Melbourne, Australia,
- Five disability development staff,
- Three artist/teachers and
- Two Children's Farm staff.

The project was undertaken over 6 months with the group meeting once a week for 2 hours at an inner city Children's Farm, which was within short walking distance of both the preschool and the TAFE art studio. Ethical

principles of voluntary participation and informed consent were followed, with participants being given the opportunity on a weekly basis to either agree or not to agree to attend the sessions.

## **MORE ABOUT THE CHILDREN AND THEIR TEACHERS**

The teachers of the preschool children were committed to actively addressing diversity issues in their program and as the participating children were from socially and culturally homogenous backgrounds and had very limited exposure to people with disabilities, it was considered particularly important to try to incorporate opportunities for the group to experience relationship building with different types of people from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds, with varying abilities, ages and lifestyles. During the planning phase of the project the teachers found time to share their personal beliefs and values about inclusive education with each other and it was not unexpected that they all wanted to ensure that ideas surrounding the discourse associated with social justice, human rights and inclusive education were honored. There was a perceived need to go further than reading books and displaying posters as a way of acknowledging difference. They were especially interested in moving away from a standardised curriculum and scheduling to designing an authentic learning program that took the children into the context of neighbourhood and community, where a safe level of risk taking would expand understandings of the diversity that exists in their world and have a positive impact of their sense of competence and identity (Nimmo, 2008). Expanding learning beyond the classroom was also seen to be a way of impacting on the wellbeing of the children and responded to recent ideas about the importance of connecting young children to the social capital of the neighborhood (Coleman, 1988; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004).

In line with socio cultural perspectives of learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Dahlberg et al., 1999) the idea of engaging the children on a regular basis over an extended period of time with a group of adults with disabilities was seen to offer unique opportunities for all participants for cognitive, social and emotional interchange.



*Figure 2-cognitive, social and emotional interchange*

The aim was for children and adults to actively participate in a range of shared arts-centered inquiry processes designed to stimulate relationship building and the co-construction of knowledge. As Wells (2001, p.179) states 'knowledge building takes place between people doing things together' and this project provided concrete access to a 'real life' situation where multiple perspectives were recognised and where the acts of listening to both familiar and unfamiliar voices and modeling open and accepting behaviours provided appropriate ways to empower all participants in a dignified celebration of difference.

### **MORE ABOUT THE ADULTS AND THE DISABILITY DEVELOPMENT STAFF**

It is widely recognised that people with a disability currently face many inequalities and barriers to participating in the life of the community, however the Victorian State Disability Plan (State Government of Victoria, 2002) outlines a whole of government and whole of community approach to disability, that is based on human rights and social justice. The Victorian Government's vision for the future is that: 'By 2012, Victoria will be a stronger and more inclusive community – a place where diversity is embraced and celebrated, and where everyone has the same opportunities to participate in the life of the community, and the same responsibilities towards society as all other citizens of Victoria' (State Government of Victoria, 2002, p.7).

The fifteen adults who participated in the 'Friends on the Farm' project were enrolled in a creative arts program offered by the Northern Metropolitan Institute of TAFE on one day a week in a restored historic building located in the same street as the preschool. The program was designed to provide participants with opportunities for learning, development and growth through explorations in visual art, music and performing arts, and it achieved the added benefit of bringing people of mixed abilities together to participate in a community activity.



*Figure 3-people of mixed abilities participating in community life*

The uniquely human behaviour of art-making maximised opportunities for individual expression, creative problem solving, collaboration and friendship building and the disability development staff worked as a strong and sensitive team to establish a collective creative spirit, address individual needs and to achieve positive outcomes for all participants.

## **MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST/TEACHERS**

The idea of involving artists in community projects has begun to garner positive attention over the past few years with a number of documented projects (Junk Theory, 2006; In the Zone, 2006) demonstrating that art projects and projects using artistic strategies can serve as a means by which a community can consider and examine its identity. The 'Friends on the Farm' project was led by a group of talented artist /teachers with diverse skills and experience of working in a community arts environment. Together they designed a program that was both environmentally sensitive and accessible and engaging for both adults and children.

The aim was to help individuals to discover their personal talents, whatever their age or level of skill or ability and to ensure that the four central principles of community arts, namely; inclusion, mutual respect, process and consensus, and generosity of spirit were honoured (Ontario Arts Council, 1998). A range of approaches including, opening and closing group rituals, mutual exchanges of knowledge and skills, small and large group collaborations and sharing were used to acknowledge individual efforts and outcomes, to reinforce relationships and to enable individuals to discover their own talents, whatever their level of skill or ability.



*Figure 4-discovering personal talents*

## THE CHILDREN'S FARM

Both the preschool and the adult art facility were located within easy walking distance of an inner city working Children's Farm where a sensory rich natural environment provided a wide variety of opportunities for artistic explorations. The farm also offered a neutral neighbourhood and community space where both groups could meet to share the joys and challenges associated with being in close contact with animals and the working life of the farm. The farm was a place where the play/work dichotomy was openly addressed. In each two-hour session, time was set aside for completing farm work such as collecting eggs and feeding animals, for shared art activities and for free play. Participation in shared community work was seen as significant in the process of relationship building and in the construction of meaningful group identity with active engagement in tasks providing participants with direct sources of information about a wide range of real life situations. Making art in a collaborative situation provided a shared focus that supported connectivity and empathy while free play stimulated excitement, enthusiasm, and a 'joire de vie' that was contagious especially for the adults who had had little exposure to the playful exuberance of young children.

## THE ART PROGRAM

The program took place in various locations around the farm. The farm barn became the place where the group gathered for its greeting and farewell rituals and at times it was used as a designated space for drawing or sculpture creation. From one week to the next participants were introduced to a range of spaces including, the horse riding area, the goat and sheep paddock, the kitchen garden, the duck pond and the open field, where different art-making opportunities provided an opportunity to experience the differing aesthetic qualities of each location.

Taking an ecologically sensitive approach, the artist/teachers planned:

- Clay slab drawing with sticks
- Clay and 'other found things'— construction
- Clay impressions of found objects
- Clay texture buttons
- Individual observational drawing of animals, buildings and people
- Group drawings
- Sand and small stone drawing
- Greasy wool constructions
- Stick and clay constructions
- Feather collage

Singing, chanting and body percussion naturally found their place in the session format and the chant:

*Hi, hi we're down on the farm*

*We're going to meet our friends here*

*Friends on the farm*

was generated during the first session and became the catchcry for the opening and closing rituals for the entirety of the project.

## THE JOURNAL – REFLECTING-IN-AND-ON-ACTION

The teachers, disability support staff and artist/teachers recorded their impressions of the weekly events as they naturally occurred in a shared electronic journal. This recording was based on remembered observations of the responses of the participants to the program and to each other, as well as personal thoughts, feelings, assumptions, motives and decisions made in relation to the program and its development. Thus, the notion of reflective practice was deeply embedded in the project design with ongoing review and analysis informing the planning, implementation and evaluation of the program. The complete process of reflecting-in-and-on-action allowed those contributing to the journal to experience surprise, puzzlement or sometimes confusion in a situation that was both unique and somewhat uncertain. Early in the project entries such as the following indicated that some children and adults were experiencing feelings of uncertainty regarding their involvement:

*As we met our friends some of whom were bound by the constraints of the wheelchairs and who were making excited spontaneous sounds there were wide-eyed stares from the children. 'S' said that she felt nervous and when I tried to unpack that with her she was unable to clarify why she felt that way (teacher participant).*

*Personally I felt that the experience was confronting and very intense. I had to dig deep to role model appropriate behaviour and to respond to the situation in as a relaxed a way as possible (artist/teacher participant).*

*To be honest I felt a little unsure of myself but felt adamant that this was a great project and that given time we would see the children (and ourselves) growing more and more comfortable and confident in this new and unfamiliar context (disability development participant).*

Such transparent disclosure points to a deep level of reflection on the phenomenon experienced and over time, journal entries such as those described below, generated by one artist/teacher and a disability development staff member, began to create a picture of growing relationships and positive shared experience:

*WOW what a session. It seemed as though we were in the midst of a creative surge. Children were moving around from place to place, gathering, acting as messengers, making, talking, brainstorming sharing and collaborating. A distinctly different feel to the previous weeks and I believe we are now feeling and seeing the true spirit of collaboration and acceptance. There were so many light bulb moments:*

- *Excited feather gatherers*
- *Singing our chant*
- *Discovering the banana tree bark,*
- *Laughing about our long hair as we placed the banana tree bark over our heads*
- *Discovering how quickly we can make a sculpture*
- *Clay, sticks and leaves... what a great combination*

- *John's chicken drawing*
- *The excitement of finding that you can indeed draw a chicken*
- *V's chicken song*
- *The quiet moment when Victoria started to sing*
- *M and J standing together to display their drawings*

*The greatest joy comes from the company and enthusiasm of the little children. It is uncommon for adults with intellectual disabilities to have an opportunity to engage directly with young children. This is an amazing experience for our students (disability development staff participant).*

Another positive outcome of engaging with ongoing critical reflection was that teachers were empowered to address a number of challenging issues to do with finding ways to describe disability to young children. The following journal entry by one of the children's teachers stimulated discussion between teachers which subsequently led to the building of new understandings of how to talk to children about disability:

*A parent has asked me to provide words to talk about adults with disabilities. His daughter referred to one of our adult friends as a funny man. This was not a disrespectful description but we need to talk about appropriate words that acknowledge difference and are respectful (teacher participant).*

Involvement in the 'Farm Art and Friends' project placed teachers in an unfamiliar and challenging situation that required ongoing and sensitive management. As each week passed and participants became more familiar with each other and any fears or uncertainties that were present earlier were, over time allayed, as is evidenced by the following journal entries:

*It seems that the ritual of meeting, greeting and saying our farewells in the circle keeps us feeling bonded. There is no shyness now, in fact, the children seem to want to move into the centre of the circle to share their ideas or dances. The adults demonstrate enjoyment of the children's performances and the spontaneous singing is a lot of fun. The song, 'always look on the bright side of life' appeared out of the blue and somehow encapsulated the joy and positivity of our shared experience. It would be great to follow it up with another chorus (artist /teacher participant).*

*I came away from today's session with a feeling that for these participants their memories of the farm will be forever shaped by the creative explorations and new friendships that were made during these weeks (disability development staff participant).*

## **THE OUTCOMES OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE**

'Friends on the Farm' was an innovative and ambitious community arts project that produced a myriad of positive outcomes. In the first instance there can be no doubt that the project achieved its goal of the establishment of reciprocal respectful relationship building between two diverse groups of people. By bringing the children and

adults together in an environmentally pleasing and neutral space, friendships had the chance to be established and to thrive. There were many recorded examples of children and adults showing care and concern for each other and over time the two groups merged naturally into one with a new sense of group identity clearly apparent. Knowledge and understandings about inclusion and diversity were expanded and by the end of the project there was a generalised acceptance of the existence of multiple views of reality including an acceptance that difference does exist but so too do similarities.

The experience of collaborative art-making provided multiple opportunities for individual and group communication and expression with all participants having the chance for creative processing that was imbued with all the excitement, vigour, magic, colour, symbolism, feeling, metaphor and creativity that the arts have to offer. Art products were enthusiastically produced week after week and at the conclusion of the project many were selected for presentation in a community art exhibition that celebrated the achievements of the children and adults. It was clear that involvement in the creative arts stimulated curiosity and imagination and resulted in individual empowerment with participants demonstrating confidence and enthusiasm for both the making and the sharing of art and art products. Understanding, empathy and social inclusiveness were also evident as children and adults respectfully acknowledged each other's skills, abilities and art products. The 'end of session sharing' was a time when the group gathered with a strong sense of community identity to recognise achievements and to respect and celebrate the nature of the unique shared lived experience. The sharing of art products seemed to bolster the morale of the group and created a unity and a level of social solidarity that was unexpected.

The challenge of engaging young children and adults in a community arts project began with a commitment to inclusive education and to the theory surrounding the social construction of knowledge. The 'Friends on the Farm' project honoured the idea that learning is socially and culturally situated and mediated with active engagement in collaborative arts activities focusing the participants beyond the 'self' to 'others'.



*Figure 5- Friendships developing in an atmosphere of respect and cooperation*

Teachers, disability support staff and artist/teachers successfully employed a range of scaffolding techniques or 'guided discovery' (Wright, 2003) to encourage both peer group and individual learning that was considered purposeful and age appropriate. The relationships between the children and the adults developed in line with the principles of reciprocity and a strong sense of agency became apparent with both children and adults demonstrating their 'two way' capacity for creative thinking and problem solving.

A significant lasting legacy of the project was the publication of the book entitled 'Farm Art and Friends' which presents through photographs and participants artworks, an insight into the experience of this inclusive community as they shared relationship building 'down on the farm'. The catch cry chant 'Hi, hi we're down on the farm' is used to introduce the 'friends' and the farm animals and as each page is opened the reader is presented with images and photographs that capture and communicate the essence of the 'lived experience' of this remarkable community arts project. The book has been produced with a CD Rom that offers teachers and parents a guide to building inclusive communities.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has overviewed a unique and innovative community arts project that successfully addressed the tenets underlying inclusive education by providing opportunities for a group of young children and adults with disabilities to explore relationship building through art making. Wegner (1998) draws our attention to the fact that a community's practice does not just come into being but rather is a result of a community's history, shared knowledge, skills, values and beliefs. In the 'Friends on the Farm' project, children, adults teachers, disability development staff, artists and farm staff, brought a shared commitment to inclusive practice as well as their individual talents to jointly explore diversity and difference. The adoption of practitioner reflection-in-and-on-action enabled all project participants to discover new and meaningful ways of relating to each other and helped to build and establish relationships over time. Some questions remain unanswered, however. Did the teachers adequately address the questions around difference that were generated by the children? Did the children and the adults with disabilities feel the benefits of community arts practice as presented? What sense did they make of the experience, their interactions with each other and the processes in which they engaged? Was the joint experience as collaborative as I have described given the limitations of verbal exchange? These questions I believe warrant further investigation.

A limitation of this project may be that it might not be easily possible to repeat this program, nevertheless its example, I believe can provide inspiration for those determined to address inclusive education through reflective practice in their own communities. Readers can take note of, and possibly replicate, the way this project evolved organically out of its own community, drawing on local sensibility to spread awareness of diversity and inclusion. The message is clear: our communities can benefit from connecting diverse groups by allowing art making to facilitate communication, expression and mutually respectful relationship building. Community arts projects and the use of artistic teaching and learning strategies can serve as a means by which communities can develop and examine their identity, providing a fresh perspective on responsible citizenship that is coloured by tolerance, empathy and understanding.

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