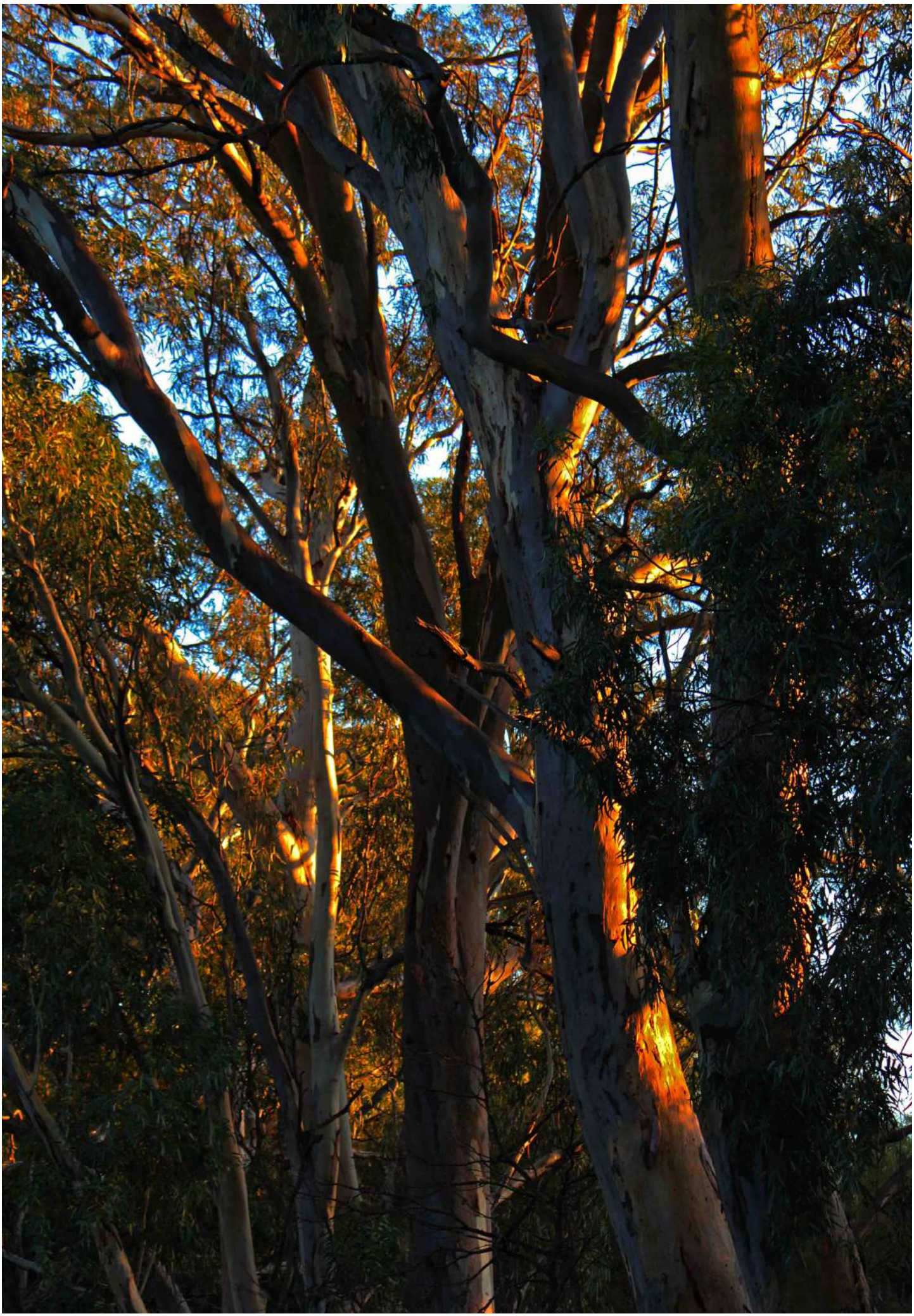

Directed attention fatigue

Yesterday I was working through policies and procedures for the Bush school. Intense work. I went outside to do my daily 'watch nature' thing (sit spot), and found, instead of watching nature, I was thinking about policies and procedures. I was mentally fatigued. Researcher, David Kaplan, has labelled this Directed attention fatigue. Research has identified two sorts of attention. One that has to be directed, and one that is effortless. As we know, students can focus their attention on video games for hours, trying to get to the next level. They can play super hero games or mums and dads all day. I've seen students crushing rocks for hours. This attention is intrinsic and enjoyable. It's the directed attention that causes fatigue. Having to focus on something and fight off distractions wears us down. Mental fatigue causes us to lose the ability to inhibit one's impulse. I find it hard to remain focused when I've worked on policies all day, and I know the sun is shining and a hill needs climbing. Kaplan says the modern human has to exert effort to do the important, while resisting distraction from the interesting.

Restorative therapy

Nature has an attention restoring ability.

Spending time in a natural environment that doesn't require directed attention allows you to rest your mind, thus restoring your capacity to direct attention. It also give you time to reflect, which Kaplan notes as a handy strategy for recovering from directed attention fatigue.

Nature doesn't have to be a rain forest extending for hundreds of miles, or a rugged limestone coastline. It could be a small little patch at the bottom of a garden or a corner in a school. Stephen Kaplan argues, environments must offer extent. They must be complex enough to constitute another world. You should be able to lose yourself in it, it should engage the mind., and take up a lot of room in your head. Watching an ant hill in a disused house block, or even a cloud formation can achieve this. This busyness that complex nature offers doesn't overstimulate the mind, like a classroom full of paintings, ABC charts and teeth brushing posters. The way a mind examines a natural environment, observes the motion of wind in the leaves, the juxtapositions of colour and texture, the patterns and smells and sounds all work to calm the mind.

So I stopped with the policy work and went for a wander. Aimless wandering is a very useful routine. I climbed a hill, felt the sun, watched a mob of roo's, smelt a wattle bush, and shout g'day to some horses. By the time I got home my brain had slowed down and re-energised.

Barrel rolling and the year 7 curriculum

FEBRUARY 28, 2020 ~ MR GLENN. ~ LEAVE A COMMENT

Rolling in barrels has always been a massive part of my Mobile Junk and Nature Playground. The gaping maw of a 200 litre barrel is too much for a 6 month old to resist. They must enter the belly of the beast. When an 18 month old rolls a barrel across a lawn they are astonished at the hulk like muscles they must possess to command such a feat.

I ran some sessions at a school a short while back. All ages engaged in barrel rolling. The grade 3,4,5's bolted to the empty barrels, and begun rolling down the hills immediately. The reception to grade 2 kids also rolled, just not from as high as the older kids. At the end of the day the grade 6 and 7's came out. These days grade 6 and 7's like to remain cool (or whatever the groovy hip new word is for cool). They like phones, youtube, and buying things, I think.

But put them in an environment with hills and 200 liter blue barrels.

Like all the other groups they bolted for the barrels. They rolled down the hills and laughed. They smashed into trees and laughed. They smashed into each other and laughed. Their teacher looked on. When you work with grade 6's and 7's all the time you know they bounce. This is the age where they

push their physical boundaries. One of them rolled down the hill and came to an abrupt stop where a tree decided to grow. He got out and shook his head (his ear was quite red). The teacher asked if he bumped his head. “A little bit” he replied. “. ” then off to the office and get a note” she said. Head injuries need a note (surely there must be a difference between a small red mark and decapitation. ‘Cant be too careful”).

The next kid rolled down the hill and found the same stubborn tree. He too emerged with a slight red mark on his head. “did you bump your head?” the teacher asked. “Nope” he replied, turning his head slightly eastward to hide the evidence. Vicarious learning in action. Learning from the mistakes of others. From that point on not one kid admitted to bumping their heads and the teacher gave up asking.

The incredible unfolding of learning that followed was a joy to observe. The group of around 10 kids then proceeded to build a launch platform, because the hill needed some augmentation. Next it needed obstacles, because rolling down a flat hill just isn’t good enough. The rubber tyre speed bumps grew into a pallet ramp. The ramp caused the stunt men (and women) to shoot out of the barrel like a circus performer shooting out of a cannon. The cohort were very concerned for everyone’s welfare, however that didn’t stop them from taking turns in being human guinea pigs as they fine tuned their endeavor. After 1 hour they ended up with what is photographed. The launch ramp was located at the bottom of the hill, barrel guard rails were erected, and logs marked the track from top to bottom. Before each launch, the victim, I mean experimenter, was interviewed (the microphone was a 4 metre flexible pipe that would transmit to a third party), an MC would announce the proceedings and a chorus of onlookers would countdown from 10. A successful attempt was met with massive applause, while a crash was met with a concerned pause then a massive applause. The barrel ‘rollee’ was then interviewed and asked to comment on the ride. Every failed attempt fueled the cohort to break into a crazed discussion as to where they could have gone wrong. After 20 or so minutes a series of rules were established by the kids. It took 40 minutes before one of the children worked out that the ramp should be wider than the barrels. Maybe that would stop them flying off at outrageous angles. A little while after that they decide to put more tires after the ramp to soften the fall. As teachers, we adults just looked on, wanting so much to help them, yet we stood back as passive observers with band-aids at hand.

For a laugh I decided to pick a grade 7 achievement standard and see if this activity met it. Check this one out.

‘Students create structured and coherent texts for a range of purposes and audiences. They make presentations and contribute actively to class and group discussions, using language features to engage the audience. When creating and editing texts they demonstrate understanding of grammar, use a variety of more specialised vocabulary and accurate spelling and punctuation.’

Though no writing was part of this, text can also be oral. When it states ‘Students create structured and coherent texts for a range of purposes and audiences’ I thought of the students sharing their head injuries with each other but not their teacher. When they bumped their head they would say to their fellow daredevils “ OMG! Did you see that! I thought I was going to die. How much air did I get?”. Their audience was their fellow risk taker and the purpose was to share the excitement, however when they talked to the teacher, knowing a small bump to the head would require an office visit, they would change the mode of their voice, and say something along the lines of “ wow, that was fun. I thought was going to nearly bump my head there for a minut”.

One excerpt from the standards that couldn’t be missed by anyone was “They …. contribute actively to class and group discussions”. This activity led to 100% engagement from a large group of students. It was very loud and appeared chaotic. When a quietly spoken lad mentioned the width of the ramp as being something to consider, the group heard him and made changes. One student’s idea was

grabbed by another student and built upon, then another student grabbed that and built upon it again. Sometimes a discussion was agreed upon by the sheer numbers of students who wanted change, other times it was because someone had an interesting idea that was sold well.

If rolling down the hill in a barrel can meet year 7 English achievement standards, imagine what STEM (or STEAM) achievements it could meet.

Tracking and not eating the yellow sand

JANUARY 8, 2020FEBRUARY 28, 2020 ~ MR GLENN. ~ LEAVE A COMMENT

A great way to connect with nature is to engage in tracking. The Book “Coyotes guide to connecting with nature” (Young, J., Haas, E., McGown, E. and Louv, R., 2016) recommends tracking as a core routine to help people connect with nature. The other day I was at a Vacation care service and the kids were really interested in finding geckos. The dry sand pit contained a treasure trove of tracks, and one looked very much like a lizard track, so we followed it. It wandered along the edge of the sandpit but disappeared among the footprints some digging kids left, however we picked it up again a few feet away. Soon the tracks disappeared and new tracks appeared. One of the kids identified it as cat footprints. The kids were so exited about the new prints they didn’t stop to think what happened to the lizard tracks. (did the cat get it? Were both tracks made around the same time?) Anyway, they followed the cat foot prints until they found a small hole in the sand. “A lizard hole” they exclaimed. One of the kids stuck her finger in the hole. “It’s wet” she said. Another kid asked if it was water. She smelt it and shouted “Argh! Cats piss!) Tracking lesson number 1: If your cat foot prints lead to a small puddle hole in the dry sand, then it is probably safe to say this is not a lizard hole. Don’t eat the yellow sand.

“I can build what I want! Nobody told me what to build.”

NOVEMBER 4, 2019NOVEMBER 4, 2019 ~ MR GLENN. ~ LEAVE A COMMENT

In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of

variables in it. '

(S Nicholson 1972 pg. 6)

That quote is one of my favourite quotes of all time. It totally sums up why I work so hard to spread the loose parts theory. Learning environments should foster inventiveness, creativity and discovery. The 'variables' is a very interesting part of the statement. Some folks think loose parts theory is about gathering a collection of stuff and having it available for use. In one way this is right. In this quote, number and kind of variables is remarked on. The variables should be many and diverse. However, the way the loose parts get used should also be many and diverse.

If we limit the freedom that loose parts play offers, then the effectiveness of them becomes reduced. Restricting their movement, interconnectedness, and purpose are some of the ways loose parts can be undermined. Here is an example. Once, but no matter when, I was at a school with a truck load of loose parts. The kids created a mud bomb factory. It was huge, and they produced hundreds of mud bombs ready to attack the other team when they have their massive mud fight at the end of the day (what they didn't realise is by the end of the day the scorching sun would have dried the mud balls into cricket ball consistency and crack your skull if they hit you, but I'm sure the kids would have worked that out). They were **consumed** by the process of this mammoth task. Some kids gathered suitable soil (not that crumbly sand the mud ball research and development team tested and dismissed), others constructed and maintained the factory itself, some guarded the factory from spies and saboteurs from the other team, and others set up obstacles to hide behind. The site was electric with energy. Some of the teachers there were unfamiliar with the creativity and discovery children can undertake while engaging in unstructured free-play and felt the play was meaningless. Just fort play. Good guys and bad guys. A few of the teachers had a secret agenda planned for the day anyway. They wanted both groups to work together and make connections. They didn't think, preparing for an all-out mud war would bring the kids together. Anyway, it would end up just getting messy, so one of the teachers called all the children together and laid down the rules of loose parts play:

- You are to form groups of five
- These must be a mix of both groups (teachers will help)
- The task is to build a cubby house and the winner gets real dojo points (dojo points are like kid's 'heroin' apparently because this excited a large cohort)
- You have 30 minutes.

The transformation of the learning environment was incredible. Where there was once an extremely high percentage of children excitedly engaged it rich social learning, driven by their own goals and strengths, there was now a sea of stressed students working towards an assessment of, what would normally be a very subjective idea of what constitutes an impressive cubby. The cubby house that stood for an hour at the end of the yard and was the musical hub of the cubby village was scavenged for resources. When the law making teacher saw a child carrying a junk drum to his cubby, he said you won't win points having a drum in your cubby (a funny thing is my house is full of musical instruments, and that makes my house feel very special). The language pre-competition was excitable and was concerned with wonderings regarding the mud battle outcome. The joyous nature of the pre-competition language enabled children to talk about construction techniques, share views on perfect mud consistency, talk about life outside of school and wonder about the abilities of the other group who they were to battle. Now the language was darker. "how are we supposed to win if they have all the barrels", "we don't have a chance because those guys always win" and "I don't even know what we are supposed to build". The final straw was when the teacher decided the winner, or should I say when he decided the 75 losers, because only five kids won.

A long, long time ago in a galaxy far from my house I was at another school who did loose parts differently. They spent a whole term looking at how other cultures use technology. They looked at the third world countries and saw how people who had very little had to get very creative with what they had in order to overcome problems, with housing, food production, hygiene and entertainment. I rocked up with my truck load of loose parts, and they let the children go to town with no instruction. What they witnessed were the children testing, discovering and creating technologies using the resources they had. They constructed houses, traps, hygiene solutions (they made an out house) and entertainment (shooting hoops using tires and 44 gallon drums) . Their distant observations of the children's unhampered play became assessments of children's understanding of their last terms curriculum uptake.

If you see a book called 'free to learn' then grab it. A guy called Peter Gray wrote it and he suggests children are wired to learn through play. To roughly quote him "in play, a child is un-hampered by evaluation. Concerns of evaluation freeze the mind and body into rigid frames suitable for carrying out well-learned habitual activities, not new creative ideas". Do we want our students regurgitating well-learned habitual activities, or take risks in new and uncharted waters.

A final word from a 9 year when asked what she enjoyed the most about her loose parts play session. "I can build what I want! Nobody told me what to build". It is a pity the Government's directing us to cram a non-contextualised bloated curriculum into our kids heads leaving little time for kids to explore their own learning their own way.

References

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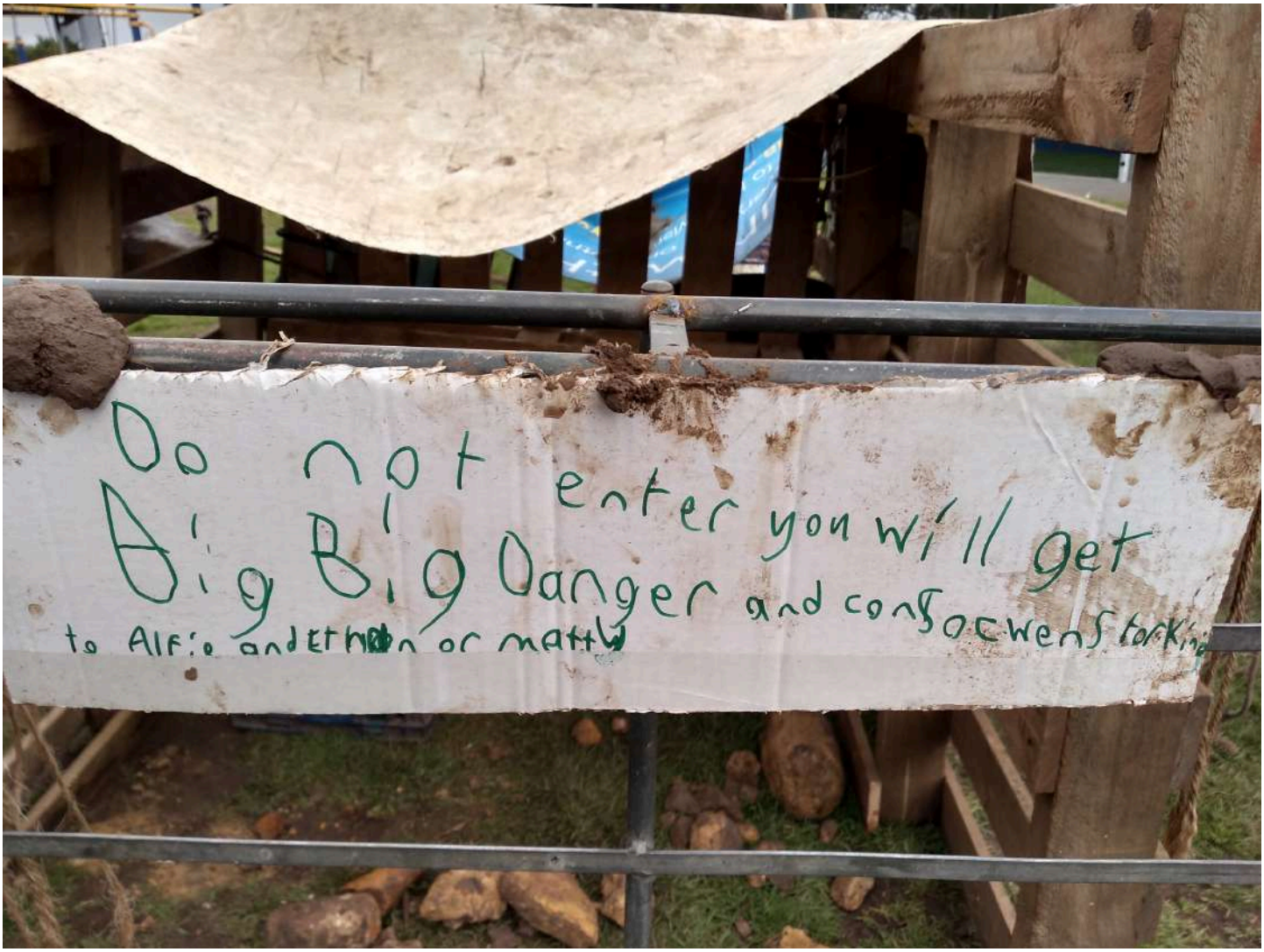
DO NOT ENTER!

JULY 30, 2019JULY 30, 2019 ~ MR GLENN. ~ LEAVE A COMMENT



Why is it when children get to free play with loose parts, they challenge the sweet equilibrium we all seek (we don't really seek it, otherwise we wouldn't be fabulous motivated educators 😊) . They build things too high, they get too messy, and they form exclusive clusters. Disequilibrium ensues and now we have to act. (Damn you Piaget with your Disequilibrium motivates learning idea). One of these equilibrium shattering activities is the "*do not enter sign'* Often when children are building cubbies, the '*do not enter*' signs often appear. As an educator, we hope all children adopt an inclusive philosophy in life. I have seen a lot of educators say, "that's not very nice, take it down". Or "everybody should be allowed in if they want". I know we must encourage inclusivity and address relational aggression but is introducing an authoritarian ban of '*do not enter'* signs the answer.

Our Vygotsky says children use play to test out adult ideas in a safe play world. '*Do not enter'* signs are on our roads, hospitals, restaurants and even most schools and kindies. If they are surrounded by '*do not enter'* signs then it only makes sense they will end up in their play.

Every time I see a '*do not enter'* sign in children's play, I first think what a fantastic text user this child is. Many signs shine when it comes to creativity. A recent one read; *Do not enter you will get big big consocwenses torkin to Alfie and Ethan or Matty*. That communicated the gravity of the act of trespass. Sometimes the sign isn't for exclusion purposes. I was at a VAC care site and the older kids put a '*do not enter'* sign on the construction. When asked why, they said it's to keep everyone away from the venomous snake enclosure.

Most times the kids just want to limit the numbers of people that can get inside. A bit like a nightclub or Australia. They have a logical reason. If everyone was welcome, then their cubby would explode from the inside out and the blood and carnage would be on the hands of the educator who facilitated this policy.

Cathy Nutbrown & Peter Clough (2009) wrote a paper that addressed inclusivity and citizenship and felt silencing the child's voice (banning signs), is counterproductive when addressing exclusion, relational aggression, racism etc. Listening to children and knowing how they feel opens discussion. They feel the children's voice is central to any understanding of their perspectives and this understanding will inform pedagogy and curriculum choice.

With all this being said, most sites let these signs exist. Often it comes up for discussion, and the child's voice is valued. Just as well, because I would hate for a kid to find out I'm a hypocrite with my lock on the front door and nobody else is allowed to ride my motorbike rule.