Before anything else, I think it’s best to explain my class. They are the reason I can tell this story. These children were a motley crew who had literally grown up together attending our centre. They were beautiful, vibrant, dynamic people. They were passionate, driven and challenging. These people of four or five years were so unapologetically themselves. They inspired me. I saw this as a great challenge.

As teachers, we have a great responsibility. I had a vision, I knew we could achieve it but the big question was how; how would this transformation take place? How would we get this from being a grand master plan to an embedded culture?

The Good Choice Initiative

This was the starting point of our culture shift. I wanted my pre-schoolers to understand they were powerful; that the choices they made had a powerful effect on themselves and the people around them. Each of the children knew they had a responsibility as a member of our classroom community to ensure the effect they had was a good one. We all had a responsibility to remind each other to make good choices.

We introduced The Good Choice Board. This was a physical representation of our acknowledgement and celebration of good choices we saw and experienced in our classroom; a way to express gratitude and say thank you. They were the wonderful moments of kindness and love that we wanted to positively promote and see more of in our classroom. Messages of gratitude covered the board. We were seeing these pre-schoolers actively striving to improve the experience of others and themselves in our classroom.

Our rights as a learning community

We were seeing great progress as we nurtured a positive, caring classroom culture. This naturally progressed into a conversation about our rights. We told an informative story; what it means to have rights, why they are so important. We embedded this into the language we used; incorporating the terminology into behaviour guidance and discussions. We made it visible and relevant to our current interests and ideals. So many discussions reverted to a consideration of everybody’s rights. That we have the right to feel happy, to have food and shelter, to play, to know love and to feel safe.

This action research project was undertaken after identifying a need for necessary change in my preschool classroom dynamic and culture. We knew we had the power to decide the sort of year we were going to have with these children and we wanted it to be positive for everybody involved.
I use my hands for good

This deeper exploration of rights birthed many different tangents of exploration, one being the notion that we use our hands for good. As you can imagine, we saw a slight misuse of power with some members of our class; casual fisticuffs plagued our days, with the majority using their hands to do it. We taught the children how much power they possessed in their hands. In times of calm reflection, we looked at our hands, felt our skin and appreciated their capabilities. We designed a book for our classroom with ideas from the majority of our class identifying ways we can use our hands for good.

What followed

We taught about teamwork. We explained we were a team and coined a teamwork mantra:

We use teamwork.
We work together,
we play together,
and we pack away together.
We care about each other,
we are kind to each other,
and we love one another,
because we are a team.
We are a family.

We redesigned our classroom environment to show our collaboration as a team. We incorporated the idea of ‘workshops’ into our educational program, where educators, children and families could host a workshop to teach a skill, share an idea or experiment together. The children could make choices, identify educational passions and interests, taking initiative to engage in learning in a respectful and reciprocal way.

We wanted our class to feel they had a valid contribution to a place bigger than our classroom. We wanted them to have connections to a wider community. So, we took them out in our world, everywhere we could. We explored the grounds and engaged in facilities available on campus at Macquarie University. We went out into our wider community and engaged in community programs and experiences. We went on excursions to places important to us. We wanted to forge more global connections to our beautiful city, so we headed out to the Museum of Contemporary Art and the workplace of one of our parents, The Opera House. We experienced and learnt about our world together.

What we learnt

In this journey, we had to celebrate the little achievements; check in and realise that what we were doing was something meaningful. We all have hard days. Days that feel a bit darker than the rest, but when you come to work and spend your days looking through a lens of gratitude, it can really change what you see. And when you do something for long enough, it becomes habitual, then it becomes a part of you. We saw a change in our classroom and our children, but luckily for us, we saw a change in ourselves as teachers and as people. Our intention was to teach our class but at the same time we taught ourselves.

As teachers, we are building the moral foundations of our future. We need to share our light with children for them to see the importance of displaying that light themselves. They need an example of how wonderful a loving and respectful world can be, so they endeavour to build a world like that themselves. We can reach a lot of people on this planet. We have a lot of power and with that, a responsibility to not only teach well, but to make this world a kinder place to be in.

The power to change this world lies in our teaching. We just need to remember to make good choices.

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