



CHILDREN ARE URBAN CITIZENS

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Children are born citizens

A citizen is something that you simply are and that is your right, because you belong in a place and are a member of the community of people who live there with you. So children are born citizens. Its not something they will become...

Children are intensely interested in understanding their world.

Through play and making they investigate their ideas.



In practice this means that children can and should exercise their citizenship from a young age. Children are fascinated by what they see and hear as they navigate their worlds. We all know how they are always asking questions. Why must we stop at robots? Why are most petrol attendants black? Who plants the flowers on the pavements? Why do some people sleep on the street? They want to know, and they want to understand. This concern for society is at the core of citizenship

When we say children are citizens, it doesn't mean that they simply know what it means to be a citizen. What their rights and responsibilities as citizens are and how they can engage as agents in shaping where they live and learn and play. At Mimosa we believe that children learn to be good citizens through the daily practice of negotiation and compromise, discussion and debate, problem-solving and decision making. We seek to create opportunities for the children to practice these skills.

In the morning meeting with our group, children share their plans for the day. Perhaps they need to finish building a house for the fairies. Maybe a small group is still busy painting the jungle gym with Uncle George. Children take responsibility for their own projects on an ongoing basis. They also in this meeting have an opportunity to express their needs and to justify their choices. Maybe Finn really doesn't want to paint outside in the sun today, but he says he'll ask Uncle George if he can finish up the next day and proposes a different plan for his day.

When problems arise, we discuss them collectively as a group, such as what to do when things are not looked after, or there is too much noise, or the plants are being trampled on. Whatever the group decides, we implement, even if it seems unlikely to us adults to work. Last year my group made chore chart. They decided that each group should clean for a whole week. Well that soon grew very tiresome for the very first group who understandably staged a protest... New negotiations led to a daily chart being drawn up!



A practice of daily democracy.

Shaping
children's
experience
as citizens.



Understanding children's agency

So to begin with, we have to **believe in** children's agency. That they are competent and able to engage with complex ideas. Here is a story about a group of children and their response to a complex question.

I was reading the story of *The Lorax* with my group of 4-year olds and one of the children began weeping, struck by the enormity of the problem. He echoed the words of the Lorax – “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better, it's not.”

The children were sooooo concerned that there were no trees in In the walled city of Thneed-Ville,. Where would the oxygen come from? And what about homes for animals and birds and insects. There would be no shade and no beauty. They agreed that trees are very important and THAT THE WHOLE EARTH NEEDS TREES.

The children began discussing what THEY would do about the problem facing the Lorax and his community. Plant more trees! But what to plant? And where to plant and how to plant? Do we have space in our garden? We decided that a first step would be to map out what grows in our very own garden.

Through careful observation, drawing, searching, making notes and creating hypotheses around their explorations, the children got to know the different plants and trees, their smells, their properties and how we might interact with them in order to broaden our understanding of the world around us. They also began to think of ways that the plants might help us better to understand ourselves, and how our relationships with the plants and trees could help us to understand our relationships with each other.

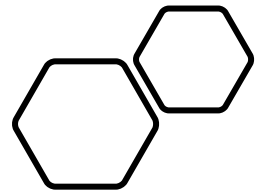
“The whole earth needs a tree, but a tree is not helping. Maybe it needs a better tree like this.” –
Manu (4)





“I made them to be so beautiful! If we did all of them to be the same they would look so funny!” – Livy

“Pick a book of flowers...”



It was clear though that we STILL needed to find out more about trees. How should we do this ? The children came up with a very, in adults' eyes, unusual idea...

They suggested that we ask **the trees** for some answers. We can see how the children are beginning **to do research** by interviewing the tree.

Following the children's lead we brainstormed what they would like to know from the tree. The children grapple with taking the perspective of another. Trying to imagine what life is like from the point of view of a tree growing on the pavement. They are **showing empathy** – another critical citizenship value.

We spoke to the trees , but wondered how the trees would hear us. And how the tree could answer.

Luka said maybe we need to get to know the tree better and how can we do that?

If you want to know someone, the children agreed, you have to spend time with them. You have to sit with them, look at them and listen to them.

And on and on the research project went, with so many questions to answer, as the children think about how to solve the Lorax's problem, that by now they have realised is **OUR PROBLEM, TOO**. What they came up with was an understanding that trees are not alone in providing food and shelter and oxygen. All plants are important. And all the life that sustains plants and that is sustained by plants.

Questions for the tree...

- How old are you?
- Tree, can I climb up on you?
- Can I see the sun and the sky from your branches?
- Do you get tired of the noise, tree?
- Do your leaves protect you from the sun?
- Tree, do you respond back? Or are you sleeping right now?





If you want to know someone If you want to know someone you have to spend time with them.





We must
plant more
plants.

Children quickly decided that they should do some planting. Because the earth needs more plants and because then we can watch to see how plants grow. Ideas of waste and recycling and climate change are coming up for discussion.

And children are beginning to see a **relationship between their actions and behaviours and the impact this has on their world.** They are also becoming aware that **they have agency** in this situation.

We saw how we as teachers and adults could facilitate the expression of children's agency. How we could make possible opportunities and platforms where they can explore, discuss and shape their experiences as citizens.



- **What lessons could another organisation draw from this urban project?**

- Children are able to think deeply, and they have amazing theories about how their cities work and creative ideas about how the city could work BETTER. We need to listen to them.
- This project (among others) showed us at school that if we work together with children and provide them with research tools that make sense to them, they will always come up with ideas to solve problems, local and global
- The WAY we work with children is so important – using participatory methodologies, using different tools like photography and mapping and design for exploration and research, and making children's thinking visible to others...
- Believe in children and in the power of their voices and their capacity to lead us (adults) to new knowledge and new ways of knowing, and not the other way around.