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Outer Bounds 2016

Report on Polyglot Theatre's multi-year arts partnership with Mahogany Rise Primary School.

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Creative Knowledge Collaborations
For Polyglot Theatre
October 2016**

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Published by Polyglot Theatre, Melbourne, 2016.

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Outer Bounds 2016 – An evaluation of Polyglot Theatre’s multi-year arts partnership with Mahogany Rise Primary School.

Cover page image credit: Kerrii Cavanagh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this report is to evaluate Polyglot Theatre's 2016 residency at Mahogany Rise Primary School (MRPS). This is a qualitative report compiled using interview data and observational field notes from the 2016 project participants, teaching staff and artists.

In 2011 Polyglot Theatre created *City of Riddles*, a collaborative project with two schools in the Frankston North area, one of which was MRPS. Since then Polyglot has enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with the school that has been well documented in annual reports outlining and evaluating each of the residency programs.

The 2016 residency, under the direction of Polyglot's Kate Kantor, brought on artist Tanja Beer and Ranger Richard Faulkner as key creative partners. The focus was on nature, the environment and experiencing the outdoors. *Outer Bounds* was about students spending time in The Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve, a 108 hectare reserve set amongst the urban Frankston. This site contains a significant remnant of bushland from the Mornington Peninsula and protects an important area of heathland. Trig Point and the Lookout provide panoramic views of the Dandenong Ranges, Port Phillip and Frankston, and a network of tracks allows visitors to walk to most features of the reserve.

The intention of the project was for the children to connect with the place and feel a sense of ownership and stewardship of The Pines and the natural world, and to want to return there after the project end.

Longitudinal Report

"Polyglot are so good at connecting with our students and that's not something that I've seen achieved through other programs."

Michael Shanks, Year 5/6 teacher, MRPS

This report forms part of a seven year longitudinal study of the partnership between Polyglot and MRPS, due for delivery at the end of 2017. Allocating funds towards a longitudinal study is evidence of Polyglot's significant and ongoing commitment to contributing new knowledge to the field of arts and education. The data gathered over course of the long term partnership will add valuable and unique evidence into the impact of such programs.

Funding history

In 2012 Polyglot secured a grant through the Department of Education and Early Childhood's Strategic Partnerships Program and Arts Victoria's Extended School Residency Program. This funding was to continue its work with MRPS under its Kids' in Control program. Following three year funding through that program, in 2014 Polyglot delivered the third and final year of the Kids' in Control residency at MRPS. Recognising the value of their long term ongoing relationship, MRPS and Polyglot independently funded a project in 2015. This was to maintain the relationship and to build annual data for the longitudinal study into the impact of the partnership. The impact of Polyglot's ongoing residency at MRPS will be assessed as part of a longitudinal study to be completed by the end of 2017.

Funding was provided by the Newsboys Foundation, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, Mahogany Rise Primary School, Monterey Secondary College, Merlyn Myer Fund, Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, Australian Communities Foundation and The University of Melbourne: Melbourne School of Design and Victorian College of the Arts.

Key Findings

This report has found that the project was successful in meeting the key aims for the primary subjects of the evaluation, the students.

The project succeeded in fulfilling the five strategic objectives of Polyglot's Kids' Collaborations program. Following are some key examples of this.

- 1. Improve socio emotional skills – accept challenges and take risks**
In post project interviews students spoke of 'getting out of their comfort zone', of resolving conflict and of developing confidence in their own abilities.
- 2. Increase engagement and success at school**
Student Rangers guided parents, family and community members through The Pines and shared with them their new knowledge about the local flora and fauna. Despite being given cue sheets to help them remember various facts, the students did not need to use them as they had retained the information.
- 3. Develop confidence in creativity and abilities**
High levels of engagement were demonstrated by the sustained amounts of time students focussed on tasks. For example, many students would ignore the recess bell and keep working throughout the breaks.

4. Improve social cohesion/inclusion

In post project interviews students identified working collaboratively in teams as one of the challenges of the project that they felt they overcame throughout its duration.

5. Increase community awareness of young people's creative capacities and the effectiveness of arts projects in schools

At the conclusion of the residency there was a strong community turnout for the final performance, in spite of threatening weather. Artists, teachers and students all commented on how pleased they were with the size of the audience for the culminating show.

OVERVIEW

Mahogany Rise Primary School, Monterey Secondary College and Region

MRPS and Monterey Secondary College are located in an area of economic and social disadvantage with the City of Frankston. MRPS is located in an area of Frankston North generally referred to as The Pines¹. In 2014 162 students were enrolled at the school from prep to grade 6. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority through the *My School* website lists the student background as 7% indigenous and 19% with a language background other than English. In 2015 67% of students were in the bottom quarter of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). This has changed from 93% in 2009 as a result of demographic shifts in the region. Since commencing at the school Principal John Culley has focussed on improving literacy outcomes for students as a priority area and sought to foster a stronger engagement with student's families and the broader community.

Compared to Victoria as a whole, Frankston North:

- Has more single person households and more single parent families
- Is more disadvantaged by a range of measures including unemployment, resident income and level of education
- Has more homes that are being purchased or rented from the government, and fewer that are owned
- Has more Indigenous but fewer non-English-speaking residents.

The reality of this disadvantage came out in post project interviews. One student discussed their housing situation and a recent period without electricity and the uncertainty of their lease, which was described as a private rental arrangement. This child, who was relatively new to Mahogany Rise and moved there recently following a change of rental accommodation, was uncertain where they would attend high school as the family may be forced to move again if their electricity continues to be cut off.

In the face of this disadvantage and under the leadership of Principal John Culley MRPS has had some remarkable successes. In 2013 MRPS became the first school in Australia to crowdfund an award winning, overseas learning experience project. They successfully funded a program to provide for eight children to participate in an international exchange to Goodlyburn Primary School in Perth, Scotland. The participating children were accompanied by two members of school staff and hosted by staff and families of Goodlyburn Primary School. They also travelled through a number of European cities whilst on the trip.

¹ Frankston North is nicknamed The "Pines" because of the former Australian Defence Force/Ministry of Housing "Pines Forest Estate" which made up the bulk of the suburb. Despite the nickname, there are no longer any pine trees in the area due to the removal of non-native fauna in the early 1990s. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankston_North,_Victoria)

Kids' Collaborations

Polyglot Theatre originally partnered with MRPS as part of its Kids' in Control Residency program. Under the strategic plan that commences in 2017 this has evolved into Kids' Collaborations, described as follows:

*In our **Kids' Collaborations** projects, genuine engagement with communities pulls our process into practical outcomes with measurable social impact. In schools and community settings, children are given room to stretch themselves, play with freedom and develop confidence to forge their own creative paths.*

The residency in 2016 under the direction of Polyglot's Kate Kantor brought on artist Tanja Beer and ranger Richard Faulkner as key creative partners and had a focus on nature, the environment and experiencing the outdoors. *Outer Bounds* was about students spending time in The Pines Flora and Fauna Reserve, a 108 hectare reserve set amongst the urban Frankston which contains a significant remnant of bushland from the Mornington Peninsula and protects an important area of heathland. Trig Point and the Lookout provide panoramic views of the Dandenong Ranges, Port Phillip and Frankston and a network of tracks allows visitors to walk to most features of the reserve.

Polyglot – School Residencies²

Polyglot Theatre is dedicated to using the arts as a powerful tool for social change and cultural empowerment.

Through our in-school programs, children are given room within an ever-increasingly full curriculum to stretch their ideas and develop the confidence to forge their own creative paths through explorative and collaborative skill-building and play.

This program builds trust and mutual respect between artists, teachers, children and their community, and delivers measurable social impact through unique creative arts projects.

Participating groups

Students

There are 32 year 6 students at MRPS enrolled in 2016 and all students participated in the residency. The average attendance over the course of the project was 29 students.

² Source: Polyglot Theatre website

Teaching staff

MRPS grade 6 teachers Michael Shanks and Michelle Cottick and classroom aide Nathan Wilson were all involved to varying degrees with the activity of the workshops and throughout the project. Both Michael Shanks and Michelle Cottick have been at the school for two years, teachers aide Nathan Wilson has been at the school for four years. Principal John Culley and Micheal Shanks both participated in the final performance piece that culminated the end of the residency.

Polyglot Staff and Artists***Kate Kantor – Project Director***

Kate Kantor works as a director, writer, teacher and performer of physical theatre. Since starting work as an actor, acrobat and teacher with TheatreWorks in the early 80's, Kate has been a member of many companies, including Primary Source, The Hunting Party, the Tea Bags Marching Band, Strange Fruit, Circus Oz and Melbourne Playback Theatre. After training at the Victorian College of the Arts, Kate studied with and then worked as the assistant to Philippe Gaulier and Monika Pagneux in Paris.

In the late 90's, she formed The Business, independent physical theatre company, as well as working as a performer with Circus Oz, touring Europe, Asia and the UK. Upon her return, she worked as Performance Studies Co-ordinator and Clown Lecturer at the National Institute of Circus Arts and continues to work as Arts in Education Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University. She has worked as a director/ teacher/ artist in residence with many diverse groups including The Australian Opera, Frumpus, Anthill Theatre, the Victorian College of the Arts, Rawcus Theatre, The Village, Polyglot Theatre, Back to Back Theatre, University of Melbourne, Victoria University and numerous schools and communities in both metropolitan and regional Australia. This year Kate is working on a new play with The Business.

Tanja Beer

Tanja Beer is a researcher and practitioner in ecological design for performance and the creator of The Living Stage – an ecoscenographic work that combines stage design, permaculture and community engagement to create recyclable, biodegradable and edible performance spaces. Tanja has more than 15 years professional experience, including creating over 50 designs for a variety of theatre companies and festivals in Australia (Sydney Opera House, Melbourne International Arts Festival, Queensland Theatre Company, Melbourne Theatre Company, Arts Centre) and overseas (including projects in Vienna, London, Cardiff and Tokyo).

Since 2011, Tanja has been investigating sustainable practices in the theatre. International projects have included a 2011 Asialink Residency (Australia Council for the Arts) with the Tokyo Institute of Technology and a residency with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama (London). In 2013, Tanja worked as 'activist-in-residence' at Julie's Bicycle (London), and featured her work at the 2013 World Stage

Design Congress (Cardiff) and the 2015 Prague Quadrennial (as part of the British Make/Believe exhibit).

Tanja has a Masters in Stage Design (KUG, Austria) and a Graduate Diploma in Performance Making (VCA, Australia). She recently submitted her PhD thesis on 'Ecoscenography: The Paradigm and Practice of Ecological Design in the Performing Arts' at the University of Melbourne where she also teaches subjects in Design Research, Expanded Scenography and Sustainability. A passionate teacher and facilitator, Tanja has been invited as a guest lecturer and speaker at performing arts schools and events in Australia, Canada, the USA and UK. Her design work has been featured in *The Age* and *The Guardian* and can be viewed at www.tanjabeer.com. Her most recent research focus explores new forms of science communication through participatory arts practice.

Richard Faulkner - ranger

'Ranger Rich' has a Bachelor of Science (Zoology) degree and a Master of Environment (Conservation, Restoration and Landscape Management) degree, both from the University of Melbourne.

He has spent many years working as a Ranger, ecologist and land manager promoting wildlife conservation across Australia. He has worked in the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia, on Phillip Island, the Mornington Peninsula and South East Queensland. Internationally he has worked on and visited projects in Spain and East Timor and spent 6 months living in Central Kalimantan (Borneo) on a fellowship for release work on Orangutans and Sun Bears.

Since returning to Melbourne Rich has started a small not-for-profit organisation called 'Reach Out For Wildlife' and focuses on environmental education for young children. Currently he is working with the ICSRG, collaborating with the Threatened Species Commissioners office, to investigate the national effort going into feral cat control.

Jason Heller – filmmaker

Jason Heller is a Melbourne based filmmaker. Jason produces narrative and experimental screen-based work, as well as regularly videographing documentation for various art and community based projects. Recent documentary projects include producing 'Quietly Settled', a short documentary about Palestinian-Iraqi refugees, for Amnesty International to present at the UNHCR Refugee Conference in Geneva and 'Share and Be Aware' to raise awareness of bicycle safety for motorists.

Jason is currently working with Polyglot Theatre in an extended residency at MRPS in Frankston North working in video-making with Grade 5-6's. Other recent projects include producing the award winning 'West Park Proposition' multi-channel video artwork for artist Ash Keating and music videos for Melbourne groups NO ZU and Lost Animal. Jason has also worked with DVA Theatre Company (disability arts group), Melbourne Workers Theatre, Footscray Community Arts Centre, North Richmond Community Health Centre, Godwin Bradbeer retrospective (Shepparton

Art Gallery), Claudio Del Fierro (Chile - South Project), as well as producing 'What Do You Think Of Me?' an Israeli/Palestinian art project. Jason is committed to working with community based organisations, particularly focussed on human rights and social justice issues.

Linda Mullett

Kurnai elder.

David Joseph

David is a professional physical performer with over 30 years experience in the performing arts sector. He has worked as an actor, dancer, musician, circus performer/director/trainer and teacher for some of Australia's best known performing arts companies including Chamber Made – 'Greek' (1996), 'The Cars That Ate Paris' (1999), 'The Two Executioners' (2002), 'Phobia' (2008-09); Circus Oz – performer/trainer (1990-2015); Dee and Associates – Tower of Light – Green Room Award Winner (2003), Taxi – Green Room Award Winner (2011), and West Theatre (1985-89). In 2013 he played a major role in the site-specific adaptation of Italo Calvino's 'The Baron of the Trees' for the Castlemaine State Festival. In 2014 he performed in 'Tales of the Laneways' and 'Behind the Public Eye' as part of The 24 Hour Experience and completed a two-month national tour of Controlled Falling Project.

He co-directed Circus Oz and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in their first co-production. He plays drums and percussion for the ARIA nominated Melbourne Ska Orchestra and The Riot Squad. He is currently completing a Masters of Applied Theatre Studies at University of New England. David's award winning play 'Deceptive Threads' telling the extraordinary true stories of his migrant grandfather's is having its second Melbourne season at the fortyfive downstairs in November 2016.

Jennifer Tran

A Chinese Vietnamese Australian community designer, Jen Tran grew up in Melbourne's western suburbs of Footscray, St Albans and Sunshine. Following studies of industrial and interior design, she undertook a mentorship with Platform Youth Theatre focusing on set design. In 2012, Jen completed a Graduate Certificate in Arts and Community Engagement at the Centre of Cultural Partnerships, VCA.

Through this certificate she developed a program pitch aimed at bringing together the Chinese Vietnamese and African communities of Footscray through food and spent the beginning of 2013 relationship building while working with Creative Rebellion Youth and Lentil As Anything Footscray. During this time, Jen identified a need to develop her skills and resources to implement the project and saw the Emerging Cultural Leaders program as a unique opportunity to do this. Mentored through the program by community theatre maker, David Cuong-Nguyen, Jen delivered her first creatively produced community-engaged project the Footscray Race as part of the 2014 Melbourne Food and Wine festival. She has since worked with FCAC as a teaching artist, project facilitator with Big West Festival, designed and

built sets for 100 Story Building and the Emerging Writers Festival and works as a project coordinator at Centre for Cultural Partnerships, VCA.

Lis Blake

Lis spent 10 years in the UK working as an outreach worker, artist, project manager and producer with leading theatre and arts organisations, including the National Theatre – Education, The Orange Tree Theatre, Half Moon and Theatre Resource - one of the UK's leading disability arts organisations where she set up a long term program of opportunities, training and employment within the arts for young people and adults experiencing disadvantage. She specializes in producing and making outstanding art and meaningful social change, with disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

Lis joined Polyglot Theatre five years ago as a project manager and over the last two years has been Community Collaborations Producer, co-building the Community Collaborations Team, developing strategy and policy; creating funding, opportunities and partnerships; building and managing stakeholder relationships; managing artists and production teams, and overseeing and supporting the projects themselves. Her main aim is to produce art which stands up as excellent in its own right and which always has the true voice and needs of the community at its core.

Lexie Wood

Lexie has over 20 years' experience working in mainstream and independent productions, festivals and events. Over the last eight years she has worked with the City of Melbourne as Front of House Manager at Arts House, working closely with the creative and technical teams on a varied program of events including Dance Massive, the Going Nowhere festival and local and international performance seasons. Lexie is also Production Manager for independent theatre company Vicious Fish. Highlights include working with the Black Arm Band on a remote area tour to Broome and Fitzroy Crossing, presenting the Italian company Dewey Dell at Arts House, working with local artists The Suitcase Royale, Post and Antony Hamilton, and working on the Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival. Lexie began working with Polyglot Theatre in 2015 as Project Coordinator on Outside In, a residency at Annunciation Primary School in Brooklyn. Lexie is currently studying postgraduate certificate of Arts and Cultural Management at Deakin University.

Polyglot Theatre is Australia's leading creator of experiential, interactive and installation theatre for children and families, encouraging Kids' to turn the simplest things into extraordinary creations.

Inspired by the artwork, play and ideas of children, we create imagined worlds where audiences actively participate in performance through touch, play and encounter. For over 30 years, Polyglot has ignited children's imaginations from tiny Australian country towns to the world's leading arts centres.

Funding Partners

Funding was provided by the Newsboys Foundation, Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, Mahogany Rise Primary School, Monterey Secondary College, Merlyn Myer Fund, Helen Macpherson Smith Trust, Australian Communities Foundation and The University of Melbourne: Melbourne School of Design and Victorian College of the Arts.



METHODOLOGY

The broad evaluation framework over the course of the residency was to assess the process, impact and outcome of all elements of the project. The five objectives of Polygot's Kids' Collaborations are to:

1. Improve socio emotional skills – accept challenges and take risks
2. Increase engagement and success at school
3. Develop confidence in creativity and abilities
4. Improve social cohesion/inclusion
5. Increase community awareness of young people's creative capacities and the effectiveness of arts projects in schools

Information collection and data sets

This evaluation employed a qualitative evaluation approach to capture feedback directly from the key informants: students, teachers and artists. In addition this evaluation is based on consideration of the following data sets:

- Artistic Director's workshop plans
- Field notes and observations from attendance during the project on:
 - Monday 15 August
 - Tuesday 23 August
 - Tuesday 30 August
 - Monday 5 September
- Interviews with students, artists and teachers during the project
- Polyglot end of day workshop reports
- Video documentation taken throughout the project and of final performance
- Written reflections from students from Polyglot post project debrief at Mahogany Rise on Monday 12 September
- Post project debrief with staff and artists at Polyglot on Wednesday 14 September
- Post project follow up interviews with students and teachers on Friday 16 September.

"I love Polyglot. We don't have a performing arts program here, or music program here. So it's good, because they bring those elements. It's what the kids all need, to use their creativity."

Michelle Cottick, Year 5/6 teacher, MRPS

History of the Polyglot and Mahogany Rise Primary School Partnership

This report forms part of a seven year longitudinal study of the partnership between Polyglot and MRPS, due for delivery at the end of 2017. Allocating funds towards a longitudinal study is evidence of Polyglot's significant and ongoing commitment to contributing new knowledge to the field of arts and education. The data gathered over course of the long term partnership, and the information that will be made available will make a hugely valuable and unique contribution in the ongoing quest to build evidence of the impact of such programs.

Outer Bounds in 2016 represents the sixth consecutive year that Polyglot has had a residency at MRPS. For each residency Polyglot has engaged Creative Knowledge Collaborations to prepare a qualitative evaluation report on the success of the project in meeting the five stated objectives of the program.

Previous years projects are:

- 2011 – *City of Riddles* (with two other schools in the Frankston area)
- 2012 – *Knock Knock, Who's There?*
- 2013 – *Grit*
- 2014 – *In my Skin*
- 2015 – *Revolution of the Rise*
- 2016 – *Outer Bounds*

Each residency has taken place at different times throughout the school year, some have lasted longer and over several terms, others have had a shorter time frame, or a larger group of artists working with the students.

As a program that has taken place at the school for a long period of time, the students have an awareness of Polyglot and there is aura of excitement and anticipation for the students about working with Polyglot. Their reputation precedes them in a very positive way.

The residencies since 2012 have had a focus on transition and have seen Polyglot work with the year 6 students as they prepare to transition to High School. To that end some of the activities take place at Monterey Secondary College, the local High School that shares the Mahogany Rise catchment area in Frankston North.

PROJECT DETAILS

“Nature and art. They were our two explorations, I wanted them to feel a connection to nature. I wanted them to feel free in nature so that they could genuinely play and I also wanted them to be proud of what they made at the end.”

Kate Kantor, Artistic Director, *Outer Bounds*

Outer Bounds was a five week residency held in Term 3 at MRPS managed by Polyglot’s Kate Kantor, with Tanja Beer and Richard Faulkner as key artists contracted for the project. For the first four weeks of the residency Polyglot worked with students on Mondays and Tuesdays from 9am until lunchtime at 1.30pm (with a recess break from 11-11.30am). For the fifth and final week the team went to the school every day in the lead up to an end of project performance for parents on Friday 9 September at sunset in The Pines. Polyglot worked with students on 12 days in total. An additional half day was spent with the teachers at the start of the project. The average residency period for Polyglot projects is 17 days. This project was for a shorter period, with more ‘guest’ artists contracted throughout.

The average number of students participating in the residency was 29 out of a possible 32. The group was made up of year 6 students from two different composite year 4-5-6 classes. This meant at times there were students working together who are not normally in the same class. It also meant that the supervising teacher on any given day was working with students that he/she was less familiar with.

The project was about combining engagement with the natural world, the flora and fauna of The Pines, and creative place making. The students were led on expeditions through the bush by “Ranger Rich”, Richard Faulkner. On one of the days the group was led by Kurnai Elder, Linda Mullett. Linda taught them about bushland flora and fauna, Indigenous history and the healing elements of the native plants. A key driver of the project was ensuring sustainability, and bringing awareness to all the materials used throughout. This included where they came from and what would happen to them afterwards.

ANALYSIS

Photo: Ricci Jane Adams



In the following sections, the project is considered in terms of the process, impact and outcome for the primary subjects of the evaluation, the students. In addition, the experience for the teachers, artists and community is also included.

PROCESS

Over the course of the five week residency the students:

- Engaged in creative costume making inspired by Indigenous animals
- Played trust games, acted as animals and learnt about performance
- Made mandalas using found objects after learning about how bower birds decorate their nests
- Planted trees in a bush regeneration area under the guidance of a park ranger
- Learnt about body percussion and worked together to perform balance tricks
- Built cubbies in the reserve out of natural found materials and decorated them with coloured string
- Collaboratively devised a final performance that brought their learning together and showcased their knowledge, costumes and cubbies
- Learnt about the history, habitat, life cycle and threatened extinction status of a local indigenous animal, the Southern Brown Bandicoot, and went on a search for it at the Cranbourne Botanic Gardens
- Learnt about design by examining different approaches to landscape design at the Cranbourne Botanic Gardens and
- Learnt skills in research, recording (photography, video, audio) and evaluating (Year 7s).

As part of the connection with Monterey Secondary College, six year seven students, previous participants in Polyglot workshops at MRPS, attended when possible to document the project and work as trainee evaluators and researchers. Videographer Jason Heller gave one student a lesson in using his SLR camera and instructed him to document the activities, while another formulated questions to ask students about the project and conducted interviews and made field notes. This was one of the strongest elements linking the project to Monterey Secondary College.

Current students noted this activity, with one student stating, "I wonder what next year is going to be like. I hope I get to be one of the year 7's helping."³

³ Please note, a full discussion of the contribution of the Year 7 students in the 2016 project is included in the longitudinal report.

Unlike previous projects, the focus of creative exploration on the transition to secondary school for the grade six students was less evident. At least one day was spent at Monterey Secondary College but the majority of workshops were elsewhere - at MRPS, The Pines and Royal Botanic Gardens at Cranbourne.

The project more organically explored concepts of home, shelter, migration and belonging. This was done through learning about the native flora and fauna of The Pines, discussions of natural habitat and introduced species and also two days spent visiting the Royal Botanic Gardens at Cranbourne. Through investigating and learning about native animals as well as introduced flora and fauna, the students were led to think about the ecology of the bush. More broadly students were encouraged to think about their own place in the world, about migration and adapting to change, and about community responsibility for the world around them.

Repeat visits to The Pines had a strong effect in cementing their learning as students recognised plants and remembered the teachings from Ranger Rich and Linda Mullett. They recited what they had learnt back to one another and to the project artists.

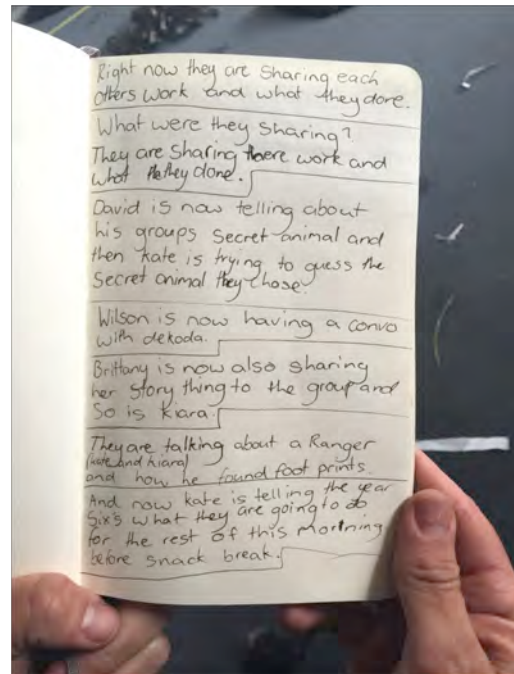
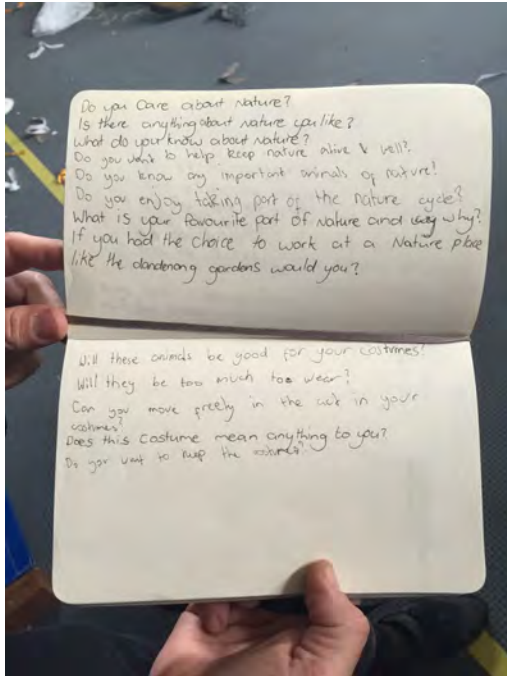
“There’s a really interesting study that came out of Cornell University a few years ago that there’s this really special window in kids development between the age of 8-13 that if they can have some experiences in nature where they’re a little bit challenged but they overcome that challenge, like moving a log to cross a creek or something like that, a really simple act...apparently what that does for kids is that they develop this real connection to nature and they seek it as a place of solace and they become activists for nature.”

Kate Kantor

The students had a great rapport with Polyglot staff and enjoyed being taken out of the classroom environment to work creatively under the guidance of Polyglot staff and artists. Kate Kantor and videographer Jason Heller are two artists who have been a recurring presence throughout Polyglot’s six year relationship with MRPS. When visiting Monterey High School on August 15 two former MRPS students ran towards Kate to embrace her with evident fondness and excitement about seeing her. Jason Heller was also recognised by previous students and some MRPS students remembered seeing him at the school in previous years. This sense of homecoming, or their own migratory return to the two school communities, demonstrated the value of the long term Polyglot residency with the artists a reassuring and welcome presence in the school grounds.

On the second day attended, in week three of the residency, students were very engaged in a costume making workshop and several stayed back throughout their lunch breaks to work on their costumes and modelled them with pride. Others wore them throughout the break and had their morning snack in character as animals.

Photos: Field notes by year 7 students



Photos: Kerrii Cavanagh

While one or two students complained about the walk, students for the most part enjoyed the journey to and from The Pines. It seemed to bring out conversations and certain students would gravitate towards the Polyglot staff and artists for a chat about the project, or just for a general discussion.

This sense of ease, of belonging, is a product of the open, equal and responsive nature of the Polyglot approach. Within the school grounds teacher interactions were more instructional and about challenging unwanted behaviour or providing discipline. The Polyglot team were able to focus on more creative and encouraging interactions with students, which engendered a more equal relationship. This also built on the ongoing relationship the organisation has with the school and the sense of possibility and wonder with which the students view Polyglot.

Students were observed quickly settling in when they reached The Pines and becoming very engaged with tasks once they were given instruction. On the day the students planted Ti-trees in a regeneration area of The Pines there were a large number of mosquitos. In spite of the discomfort, many students were disappointed when the trees to plant ran out and it was time to return to school. Many talked about coming back to check on 'their tree.' On the return walk students dabbed their mosquito bites with bracken root, using the traditional knowledge Linda Mullett had shared earlier. For the most part children were observed transitioning between tasks with focus and engagement. Usually between the morning session and the session

following morning tea there was a change of venue and task, and with a few exceptions students switched gears with relative ease.

The time required to walk to and from The Pines repeatedly took longer than was allowed for in the schedule, even into later weeks of the project. This reduced the time available to students to pursue the creative endeavours planned for those sessions and several times led to the students to express frustration that they had to leave when they felt they had just got there. Whilst this demonstrates that once outdoors they were engaged and possibly experiencing a “flow” state, it is also fair to say the sessions outdoors were often shorter than anticipated due to the transit time.

In the fourth week of the residency the evaluator attended a day where the students came to Monterey Secondary College. The first exercise was a trust building one involving students working in pairs with one blindfolded while the other used animal sounds to guide the blindfolded partner around the playground. This exercise was about accepting uncertainty and to reinforce the idea that the creative process is about going on a journey, of which you don’t know the outcome. Boys paired with other boys and girls with girls. Some were observed deliberately leading their blindfolded partner into furniture or peril.

Following this the students made decorative mandalas using found objects in the school grounds. In introducing the exercise Tanja related it back to the behaviour of the bower bird and place making or making a home. She drew a link to this and the cubby building taking place in the pines. Children were encouraged to use found objects and to draw conclusions about the process of design and creating things using the resources at hand. The boys were observed making very sculptural structures with large objects, some of which they stole from one another’s creations. There was some conflict over who was in what group and certain kids were excluded from groups.

In a classroom exercise to discuss possible storylines for the final performance piece students pushed the boundaries and suggested what the students believed to be provocative ideas that may be dismissed. The skilful and deft playfulness, and the “no wrong answers” approach with which Polyglot engaged with all ideas soon shifted the energy of the discussion. The ideas evolved and a storyline emerged from the suggestions.

The final week and performance event

"Give the child responsibility and they will meet the challenge. Flexibility in the moment is really important when working with kids." David Joseph, artist.

In the final week of the residency leading up to the performance the students learnt body percussion and circus skills with artist David Joseph, who again brought out the idea of the resources we have within us and what can be made using your body and creativity. The students worked on counter-balancing exercises, again reinforcing the message of creativity being available at all times, and the power to create being available if you seek it. Kate Kantor draw the parallel with trust and creativity and that the students need to trust one another and work together as they prepare for the final performance.

"Children being able to show the adults what they learn is why we do this." Sue Giles

The weather was a challenge on the night of final performance. There was very heavy rainfall throughout the day and uncertainty around how that would affect the performance. The approach was to trust that it would be 'alright on the night', no wet weather plan was devised. In the end ponchos were purchased in bulk to keep the audience and performers dry. Thankfully, the rain cleared for the performance and it was able to go ahead in The Pines as hoped for. Despite the inclement weather lots of family and community members turned up for the final sunset performance. Staff and students commented on the turnout and were very pleased to have such a good crowd.

"Parents loved that it was outdoors and in The Pines, in their community. We had a massive turnout."

Michelle Cottick, Year 5/6 teacher

Student Rangers guided parents, family and community members through The Pines and shared their new knowledge about the local flora and fauna. Despite being given cue sheets to help them remember various facts, the students did not need to use them. They eventually led the audience to the set, where the group of cubbies the students had previously built and decorated surrounded an area cleared for the performance.

The show integrated the work in the month leading up to it - the costumes, the cubbies, the percussion and the performance making. As devised by the students, teacher Michael Shanks and Principal John Culley played litterbugs with little regard for nature. When they fell asleep after gorging themselves on junk food the children in their costumes with their headlamps on came out of the cubbies, making animal noises, and performed a series of percussive improvisations of increasing complexity.

Their performance woke the litterbugs and the students gestured for the staff to copy them, and to clean up their mess, which they do. Everyone cheered.

Following the in situ event at The Pines everyone returned to the school for drinks and snacks and to watch a film made by videographer Jason Heller. The video showed the students in costume at Cranbourne Gardens leaping through the sand in character as native animals, chasing teacher Michael Shanks and herding him into a trap.

"It was great that so many parents turned up to the final performance, especially given the weather."

Michael Shanks, Year 5/6 teacher



IMPACT AND OUTCOME

“Seeing the growth of students was a real highlight for me as a teacher. The information retention and confidence of one the students was remarkable. Her confidence and remembering information was off the charts compared to what we see in class. It was incredible.”

Michael Shanks, Year 5/6 teacher

During the five week project students were witnessed accepting challenges and taking risks and also self-identified these behaviours and recognised growth and change within themselves.

The students working together in small groups often had conflicting approaches or wanted different short term outcomes and regularly struggled to work cohesively and cooperatively. Whilst some felt the conflict was ultimately resolved and things worked out in the end, others felt aggrieved and left out and frustrated by the process.

As one student noted, “It was difficult working together and focussing on a certain thing, sometimes we'd argue about what to do, but it was good working with your friends.”

As the students were from two different classes they were less accustomed to working together, the groups were self selected and not everyone was able to find a group that wanted to accept them. Some students wandered between groups unable to slot in. Others worked at cross purposes, with one undoing the work of another or working towards a different goal.

Another student said of the collaborative work, “At first it was weird being around other people so much because I'm used to being independent. But I'm more able to do team stuff now.”

Whilst it is acknowledged that learning to problem solve, navigate conflict and resolve disputes is empowering for students to experience and achieve independently, it can also be traumatising if that's not the outcome. For students already experiencing social isolation and exclusion it can compound those feelings. It was evident that several students felt excluded and frustrated trying to work in the small teams. This emerged in post project interviews and feedback as the most difficult thing for a number of students.

For those few excluded students that had trouble navigating into a group more assistance or helping them find the most appropriate group to work with would be beneficial. This may take the form of more trust building and conflict resolution exercises or shepherding through conflict when it happens, or both. In instances like

these when this occurs, Polyglot's work would benefit from greater support from the teachers. They are best placed to intervene without compromising the independence of the students and the relationship with Polyglot.

The in situ learning about the heathlands, the healing elements of plants, what can be used for food and what is food for native animals resonated with the children. The art, science and nature components of the project and the respective areas of expertise of the contracted artists gelled together exceptionally well. The children were observed engaging with exceptional focus on creating costumes inspired by native animals following a visit to Cranbourne Gardens, they were working collaboratively and cooperatively and many stayed back through their lunch break to continue their work.

Students also worked in small groups of around six to eight to build cubbies in The Pines, again there was high level of engagement and focus on the task. Whilst students identified working together on this element of the project as challenging, they also noted that over the course of the project they overcame personal conflicts and were able to work collaboratively towards to common goal of completing the cubbies. As one the students noted, "Working in teams was challenging, we'd argue about who was going to do what, mostly it worked out in the end."

The cubbies were the site of the culminating performance in week five that brought together the learning and elements of the workshops over the preceding weeks.

"What were doing is about using design as a tool to connect kids to nature. So building cubbies was a really fantastic example of that as they're using natural material, they're using found things to construct the cubby. Gives them the idea that all the materials you need to design things are all around you."

Tanja Beer, artist

Artists and Teachers

"I get to pick up on all these skill sets from people who are very different to me and have different ways of dealing with students."

Michael Shanks, Year 5/6 teacher

It was observed that throughout the project, sometimes the teacher's handed the students over to Polyglot, other times they would be more directly involved in the activities of the day. Whilst allowing Polyglot to independently manage the workshops limited the authoritarian gaze of the teachers it also minimised the ability of the teachers to learn from Polyglot's approach and experience different ways to creatively engage students. Whilst it is sometimes an operational requirement and unexpected things happen taking teachers away from the space, the teachers both

expressed that they learnt unexpected things about certain students capabilities and about alternative methods of engaging students whilst working with Polyglot. Maximising this learning is hugely beneficial for the students and teachers alike.

“Having watched how Polyglot work, I will ensure a more hands on approaches with some kids, and give them side projects as a reward for other work they do in the classroom.”

Michelle Cottick, teacher.

For newer artists working with Polyglot they took the lead from existing staff, but there was sometimes a sense of quiet bewilderment among contracted staff. Occasionally the uncertainty around what was going to happen next or how to deal with unexpected issues, particularly weather or venue changes, was stressful and would cause loss of momentum and lessen the success of the pursuits that day. In seeking to work together as a team in an egalitarian way there was confusion over who was in charge and what was going to happen.

A number of artists and Polyglot staff travelled to and from the venue together in the Polyglot van. Planning the day and debriefing afterwards in the van commuting to and from the school was an important part of the process and solidified a sense of the team and understanding the work. It was challenging for additional staff and artists when they are not able to travel in the van and didn't benefit from that team building and understanding of the day's events and occasionally led to confusion and uncertainty around their role and what was planned for that day. For example, the videographer was in attendance on a particular day with the intention of filming the percussion workshop for use as a soundtrack for the in-project film. He did not travel in the Polyglot van and on arrival found out that the workshop of the day had been changed to circus skills. With limited attendance budgeted for his work this made the creation of the end of project film more challenging.



Photo: Sarah Walker

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

“Polyglot’s not at all like school because we were outside and experiencing fun things, but we learnt lots about nature and animals. Its going to be boring now sitting doing work in school.”

Student, Year 5/6

The aims of Polyglot’s Kids’ Collaborations School Residency program are to:

1. Improve socio emotional skills – accept challenges and take risks
2. Increase engagement and success at school
3. Develop confidence in creativity and abilities
4. Improve social cohesion/inclusion
5. Increase community awareness of young people’s creative capacities and the effectiveness of arts projects in schools

Overall, the 2016 residency was incredibly successful in meeting the key aims. Students, teachers and participating artists all provided positive feedback on the project, the workshops, the process throughout, and the culminating final performance. During the five week project students were witnessed accepting challenges and taking risks and also self-identified these behaviours and recognised growth and change within themselves. In post project interviews students spoke of ‘getting out of their comfort zone’, of resolving conflict and of developing confidence in their own abilities. This demonstrates the project’s success in achieving goals one to four. A successful final performance with a solid turn out of family and community members also demonstrates the project’s success in achieving goal five.

The results of the research provide evidence indicating the project's overall success in fulfilling the aforementioned five strategic objectives. High levels of engagement were demonstrated by the sustained amounts of time students focussed on tasks. For example, many students would ignore the lunch bell and keep working throughout the breaks. Students identified working collaboratively in teams as one of the challenges of the project that they felt they overcome throughout its duration. At the conclusion of the residency there was a strong community turnout for the final performance, in spite of threatening weather.

Working with conflict and uncertainty, and evolving plans is something that Polyglot staff have learned to do well and is in the nature of the work they do with children. Harnessing ideas and shaping projects using the input from the kids they work with is how child led projects evolve. For the students at MRPS however, changing plans and uncertainty over what's happening on any given day can derail the students' sense of place and purpose. The teachers often mentioned that the students work better with structure and knowing what's going to happen. Finding the balance of structure and freeform within the day to day of running the project is the line Polyglot walks. Sometimes it can veer off course. Ensuring there are measures in place to minimise last minute changes, that there is effective contingency planning and realistic or overly generous estimates of the time tasks may take will help ensure the students gain maximum benefit from the time they spend with Polyglot.

Recommendations

To further enhance Polyglot's impact and the degree to which the Kids' Collaborations objectives are met it is recommended that:

- Polyglot staff work more closely with teachers to identify day to day the students who are struggling to find a place in a group when undertaking collaborative work and to create a more scaffolded and inclusive experience for those students who need it.
- Work with teachers to help them learn elements of Polyglot's student led creative and inclusive pedagogical approach to enhance student engagement and to ensure ongoing benefit in the classroom after Polyglot's residency concludes.
- Ensure timetabling is as accurate as possible and contingency plans are in place to maximise available time to engage in workshop activities and to ensure artists and staff who are in attendance understand their role.
- Foster opportunities for student led evaluation within projects, as with the year 7 students who came on board as ethnographers in training for *Outer Bounds*.