

# THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS

## A JOURNEY OF ORNITHOLOGICAL AND ARTISTIC DISCOVERY

MARIE HAGE

*Blessed with an enviable adjoining 2-hectare bush block bordered by the North Para River, the Tanunda Lutheran Early Learning Centre could be forgiven for resting on its nature play laurels. However, influenced by the Reggio Emilia pedagogical philosophy and inspired by the 2011 "Hundred Languages of Childhood" exhibition in Canberra, the ELC educators and children have taken themselves on an enriching artistic journey of discovery using nature and ornithology as their guide.*

We are lucky at the Tanunda Lutheran ELC: our 2-hectare bush block offers boundless potential. Ironically, the challenge we face is how not to waste such a gift. Given that our ELC program is influenced by the Reggio Emilia philosophy, founded on the conviction that we learn through making connections between things, concepts and experiences, and do so by interacting with other people and our surrounding environment, we know the importance of letting children make their own journey of discovery. What better place, then, to begin this journey than the bush block?

In 2016 children and educators at the Tanunda Lutheran ELC became ornithologists. Our interest in birds began in January 2016 when we observed many more bird species in the bush block. Was the increase in the numbers and species of birds a direct result of the ELC's 2013 bush block re-vegetation project?

It was decided with the children that we would look closely at the birds in the bush block and record the species we had sighted. A provocation box containing photos of birds in the bush block, facts about birds, websites related to ornithology which could be referred to with the children, and figures of different species of birds was created.

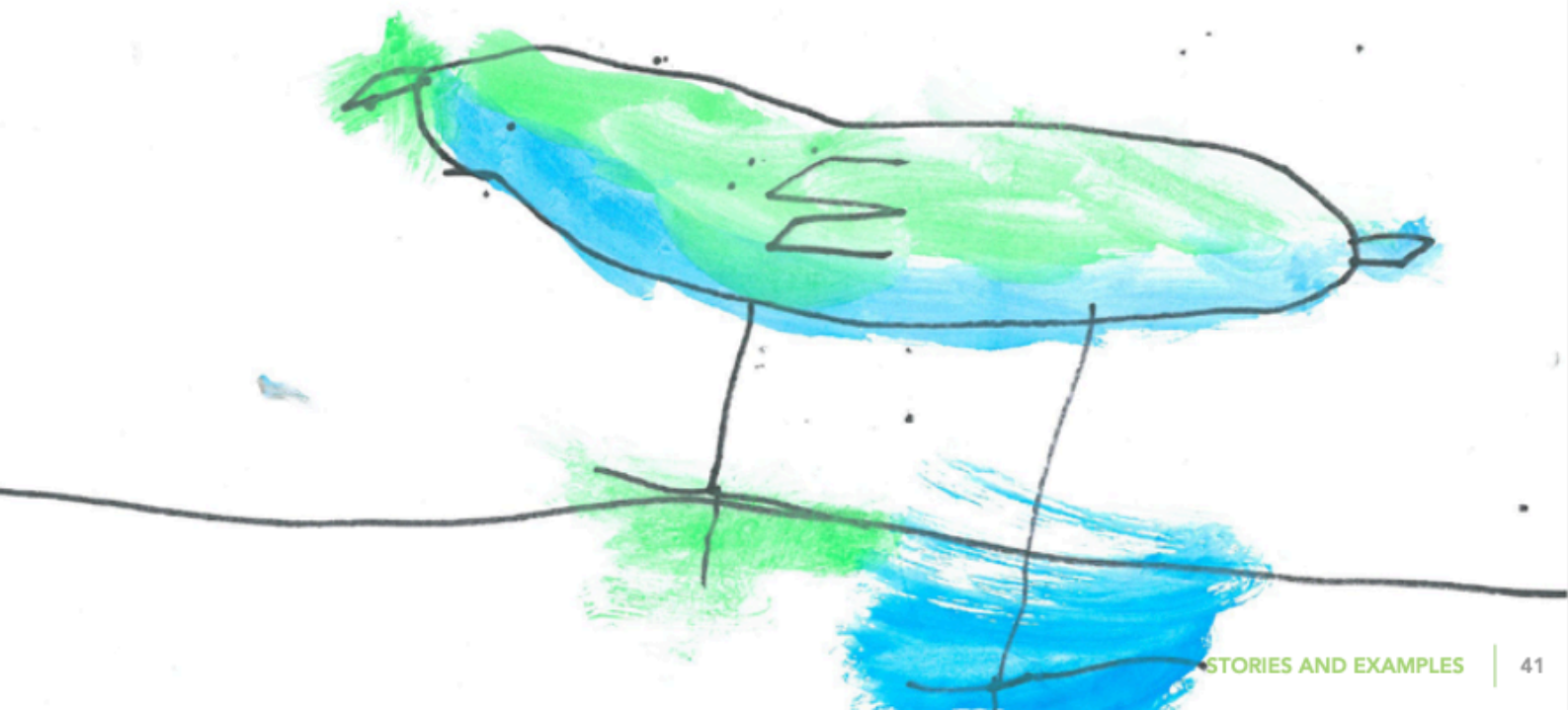
Although many more birds were found in the bush block, we realised that the vegetation catered for birds that live high up in trees and there was little vegetation suitable for birds which live in low bushes and eat grasses. After researching which plants and grasses would attract different local species to the bush block, Easter 2016 saw ELC families donate and plant over forty bird-attracting local species of shrubs, low-growing trees and grasses in the bush block and in the ELC garden.

*"If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, let us first allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it."*

DAVID SOBEL

Throughout 2016 the children made their learning about birds visible through some of the "Hundred Languages" of children – conversations, dance, songs, yoga, photography, paintings, drawings, clay, storytelling, videos, collage, mosaics, wood constructions – and the list goes on. Each language allowed the children to explore and express their thoughts and observations in different ways, as is explained on the adjoining pages.

As Reggio educators, we view children as strong, competent, resourceful and the co-constructors of their own knowledge, citizens of the world from birth. The project inspired by bird watching in our bush block was so fruitful and enriching that the children's artwork became an exhibition, entitled "The Language of Birds", at the Barossa Regional Gallery. We wonder where nature play and our ornithology journey will lead us next?





## THE LANGUAGE OF COLLAGE

Finding our voice through collage was initiated through the photographs taken by the children in the bush block. Along with prints of their photographs, we provided the children with open-ended materials that could be cut, torn, squashed, layered, painted and pasted to create a unique story, offering a range of possibilities. We also added a dimension to our work on sustainability. The children had been looking at what materials can be recycled, and for what purpose. Using our study of birds as our inspiration, we created works of art using recycled materials, providing a voice for children to express their understanding of our project as well as their connection to the world around them.



## THE LANGUAGE OF PRINT-MAKING

Through print-making, children receive direct sensory input which helps them feel connected to their art piece and to their environment. The main inspiration for our print-making was a feather. To create an interesting print, the children carefully studied the features of a feather, discussing with each other and with educators what they could see, and then transferred these features onto a piece of foam. Some children revelled in the repetitiveness of printing, others in its randomness.

*"They're not leaves anymore,  
they are feathers for my messy  
bird."*

## THE LANGUAGE OF DRAWING

The children's drawings for the project were inspired by their observations of birds, feathers, nests and habitats, and the stories and discussions which arose between the children themselves and their educators and families. Drawing from observation "always involves interaction between seeing and reasoning, feeling and memory. Each person 'sees' differently, each chooses different parts to draw." (Kolbe, 2006).

## THE LANGUAGE OF MOSAIC

Our provocation for the children's mosaic work was baskets of tiles, pictures of mosaic work, simple line drawings and photographs of birds from our bush block. Inspired by our time in the bush block, the mosaic work touched on a wide range of skills from across the curriculum: numeracy skills through sorting, counting, patterning, ordering, identifying shapes, working with area and perimeter, and spatial awareness; fine motor skills and manual dexterity; hand-eye coordination; problem solving and decision making. All the while, a creative language was being unearthed and journeys of self-discovery, expression and pride were evolving. Working on our mosaics provided opportunities for children to discuss what they were doing, enhance their understandings about birds and the world around them, nurture an interest in the creative arts, as well as pursue their interest in particular birds through research, design, creating and reflection.



IMAGE: Tanunda Lutheran ELC

## THE LANGUAGE OF CLAY

Exploration of clay allowed the children to understand the 3D world of shape, form and perspective, all of which are early geometry understandings. It encouraged critical thinking and problem solving, story telling and creative expression, and also gave opportunities for rich conversations and the communication of ideas. The use of natural loose parts to embellish their clay creations further connected the natural world to their learning.



## THE LANGUAGE OF WEAVING

Weaving and sewing was an ideal medium for our ornithology project, as the children discovered through the process of weaving their own nests that birds are, of course, expert weavers – as are spiders and beavers. Through collaboration, discussion, sharing, turn taking, problem solving, concentration and creativity, the children reframed their perception of a nest. The value of the nest project lay not in the correctness of the weave and the neatness of our stitches but rather in our collective endeavours: without being bound together, each thread would remain a fragile, fluttering whisp of potential; once woven together, the threads become a structure strong enough to nurture and provide shelter – a metaphor, perhaps for the power of collaboration.



## THE LANGUAGE OF YOGA AND DANCE

The names of many yoga poses are derived from birds, making yoga a perfectly suited language for our project. Children used their knowledge of pre-existing yoga poses, gathered during ELC relaxation times, to develop their own poses based on their understandings about birds. In small groups we explored concepts of stillness compared to movement, poses compared to dancing. We researched the movements of the birds we had learned about in yoga, discovering new vocabulary, new ideas, new birds and new ways of moving: we began to see how our bodies could soar, fly, flap, swoop, bob, pivot, spin, sway, shake, hop, bounce and glide.

Dance and movement in aboriginal culture became an integral part of our learning as we watched how people closely observed the movements of birds and then imitated these using their bodies. We discovered new kinds of music through aboriginal dance and explored how our bodies can respond to rhythm, melody and sound. Learning about yoga, music and dance taught us about diversity and other ways of "being".

## THE LANGUAGE OF PAINTING

Involvement in the expressive arts allows children to revisit subjects of interest over and over again through many different media to gain multiple perspectives and a higher level of understanding. As part of our ornithology project, the children used paint to create vibrant portraits of the birds they had observed and learned about. Children's painting often displays less detail than their drawings and this is partly because using a wider brush is a very different experience to using a pen, and Kolbe suggests it involves a different way of thinking (2006).

## THE LANGUAGE OF BUILDING

Inspired by her work with Scottish educational consultant and outdoor learning advocate Claire Warden, ELC educator Nicole guided the children to make light cubbies out of sticks. Harnessing the children's interest in collecting sticks, leaves and feathers, Nicole encouraged them to discover ways of making 3D structures that would form the "cubbies". The children collected, sawed, measured, glued, tied and worked together to create structures that we could then use to explore the properties of light, shadow and perception by attaching natural and synthetic materials to the "windows". We used our collections of leaves and feathers, along with collage materials, to create images and designs with a central bird theme that connected us to our ornithology project work.

*"My favourite pose is the pigeon because you can do this [demonstrates pose] and my arms become like the wings. My hands are like the bird's crest!"*



## [ ABOUT MARIE ]

Marie is a qualified early childhood educator with thirty five years experience in pre-schools. She is the founding Director of the Tanunda Lutheran Early Learning Centre which opened in 2011.