

## **Making Our Expectations Visible**

### **By Emily Minter**

At the school where I teach, I am fortunate enough to be with one group of children for two years where we travel from Prep to Grade one together. At the beginning of their Prep year, I am always greeted by a group of fresh, eager and sometimes anxious five year olds, ready to commence their first year of school and embark on a new learning journey. For two years, I get to observe them grow and develop as a community. Within this community, the children learn how to develop trusting and respectful relationships with one another, as well as their teachers. They learn that in order for these relationships to strengthen, they require a set of values, or expectations to be followed in order for us all to work together co-operatively. Building these expectations takes time and consideration based on the needs of our community. They require purposeful modelling and support, and they take perseverance and encouragement. The children require a social conscience and skills in understanding the difference between right and wrong, being able to appreciate different perspectives and the development of respect for the interactions that occur. As the adults taking care of these children on a daily basis, we have an obligation to model good and socially just values and expectations and to encourage their development in the children we are nurturing. Within this context, our children are given the opportunity to develop their own set of values and expectations that they will carry with them throughout their lives.

Each new group of children that journeys into my classroom is faced with the challenge of establishing a cohesive community with new classmates, new teachers, new expectations and the concept of becoming increasingly responsible and accountable for their actions. These are experiences that they will re-encounter at numerous times throughout their lives. From my own observations, I believe it is the expectations that one has placed upon them that form the basis for respectful interactions with others, and the considered employment of ones attitudes and behaviours. As adults, we have already developed our own set of values and expectations from the experiences that we have had and from the influence of those around us. They are naturally employed in the relationships that we have in different settings: at home, at work and on social occasions. They become a part of who we are and how we are identified as individuals.

In setting up my classroom at the beginning of the year there are many factors that are taken into account. Two questions I am constantly reflecting on refer to the expectations we create; 'what do I expect from my students?' and 'what will they expect from me?' I know that I expect the children to be mindful of others, honest, thoughtful, respectful, resourceful, problem solvers, creative and independent thinkers amongst many other attributes. In turn, I would like to think that the children would expect me to be a good role

model, fair, supportive, encouraging, kind and passionate about the learning they are to engage in.

In the past, I have set up clear guidelines and routines to foster the learning and enable relationships to run smoothly and respectfully. I have developed expectations that I felt would be of importance for my students. I have told them what is appropriate and what is not, how to treat others and how to behave. When going into my fifth year of teaching however, I felt it had now become important for the children to take part in the process of developing these expectations, not only for themselves but also for one another and their teachers. Rather than me telling the children how to behave appropriately, I was ready to release some of the ownership as to how we collaborated as a community and discuss with the children why particular behaviours are appropriate and possible outcomes that might occur when interacting with others. My intent therefore was to explore what the community of learners in our class considered important in developing a respectful, safe and friendly environment and how this could be maintained. It had now become my role to facilitate and drive the children's understanding of different expectations in order to develop common understandings among both teachers and children. These would assist in setting a standard for how our community interacts co-operatively. The process would need to be ongoing and flexible, based on the developing understandings of the children. Furthermore, I wondered how the establishment of these strong and unifying expectations within our community would transfer to the children's other relationships, now and in the future.

As we started off the year, the children ventured into the prep classroom each morning a little more confidently, conscious of the environment surrounding them and excited about building new relationships with their peers. After several days of getting to know each other by name, our likes and dislikes and our favourite colours, it came time to establish some common understandings with regard to how we expected one another to behave in a cooperative learning environment.

### **Forming positive social behaviours**

Over a period of three weeks, the children listened to various stories related to manners and positive social behaviours, discussing their thoughts and understandings along the way. They were invited to share and discuss some of the things they felt were important in making our environment a place where everyone would feel safe to learn. 'What do you expect from others while you are at school?' The children responded eagerly to the question.

*'That people won't push me off the monkey bars'.*

*'That people won't be noisy because I have sore ears'.*

*'That people won't break my Lego cars'.*

*'That everybody will be friends'.*

The comments of not getting hurt in the playground, of not breaking work and everyone being good to their friends were common sentiments. They also illustrated their concerns regarding their own safety. While the children had a strong notion of how they didn't want people to behave, I wondered if this meant they had developed the idea that essentially, bad things were going to happen. Were their comments based on observations or experiences they had had in the past, or was it simply the phrasing they used to share their concerns? If we were going to establish a set of common understandings for our community to engage in, I wanted them to be phrased in a positive manner so that the children had a set of behaviours they should engage in rather than ones they should not. This would take most of the guesswork out for them.

The children had demonstrated that they were extremely conscious of ensuring that they were looked after by their friends and peers and were given the opportunity to be respected and listened to by all. Together we spent time looking closely at the expectations the children had for both themselves and one another and then we grouped them into like categories. We discussed how things could be both negatively and positively phrased and how we wanted to remind each other of positive ways to engage rather than remember all the things that they shouldn't do.

When looking at our groupings, the children observed many similarities in their ideas. *'I expect that no-one will push me down the slide and I expect people to be nice on the equipment, they're the same thing because they're both about not hurting. And I expect no one will talk when I am sharing and I expect people to listen to me are the same because they're both about listening. Maybe they can be the same thing.'*

### **Facilitating their need to behave in a respectful way**

When unpacking their thoughts further, we found that their expectations seemed to encompass overall ideas related to friendship, learning, listening, respect, the environment, animals, helping and taking care of belongings. As a result, the children and I together wrote eight expectations that we felt were important in making our community a respectful and safe place to be. We wrote them and re-wrote them several times, until we were happy with how they sounded. The children also created symbols to represent their expectations (see accompanying pictures).

*Make friends and let others play* (Fig 1).

*Respect others and their learning* (Fig 2).

*Listen to each other* (Fig 3).

*Look after nature and the environment (Fig 4).*

*Be gentle with the Bearded Dragons (Fig 5).*

*Help others (Fig 6).*

*Take care of our own and other peoples things (Fig 7).*

*Use your manners (Fig 8).*

These statements took time to develop and were discussed at length as to how the children understood them. I felt that they were now on their way to understanding and developing life long values.

### **Fostering Independence**

In building on the children's early thoughts about our class as a group functioning together, I also felt that there was more to developing expectations for learning together than simply facilitating students' need to behave in a respectful way towards others. There was a need for the children to become increasingly independent and take ownership of their actions and their thoughts. There was a need to deepen the children's thinking and understandings and get them to think positively about being socially conscious members of the community. In developing greater student accountability for their actions and behaviours, I was making room for the children to develop reasonable expectations and in turn take greater responsibility for themselves.

We now had the challenge of how to implement our expectations in a positive, engaging way that the children would be able to take responsibility for. While being there to offer guidance and support, I did not want to be the person they sought out to be peacemaker or in making the final decisions as to how one another should conduct themselves. I did not want the children to act out of willingness to please the teacher, but rather to foster a sense of self-pride and respect for their peers. I wanted their actions to be carefully contemplated and for the children to be the problem solvers. I wanted them to be accountable to their peers for their actions, to be responsible for making sensible choices, to seek alternate paths and understand the impact of their behaviour.

To do this, we continued to break our expectations down further. Using a 'Cultures of Thinking' routine, Colour/ Symbol/ Image, we set about illustrating how we wanted to employ ourselves on a daily basis. The children had used this routine earlier in the year. Beginning with 'image', (Fig 1-8) we unpacked each expectation to see what it would look like using positive behavioural statements.

### **Respect others and their learning.**

- *Explain things nicely to each other.*

- *Think about how you would like to be treated. If you don't have anything nice to say don't say anything at all.*
- *When someone is listening to something, let them listen by not talking to them.*
- *Work quietly when people are learning.*
- *Try not to annoy other people by touching them when they are learning. Keep your hands to yourself.*
- *Be careful of others peoples things that they have made or are working on.*
- *Tell your friend their picture is nice.*

Again the children engaged in lengthy discussions to develop these behaviours and write them in a positive way, demonstrating how they expected one another to behave rather than what they should not do.

After developing a set of behaviours and images for each of our expectations, we set about creating a symbol and choosing a colour to represent each. I felt that this approach would later give the children something visual to refer to within the classroom and would therefore assist the children in more closely identifying with the expectations, committing them to memory and incorporating them into their daily interactions. In small groups, the children set about developing an appropriate symbol and choosing an appropriate colour to illustrate and represent each expectation.

Our community often engaged in small or whole group discussions where each child is given the opportunity to comment or respond to others in a respectful way. Through continuous practise and guidance, the children become increasingly respectful of listening to their peers and able to respond with their own thoughts and questions. To illustrate the discussion the children engaged in with regards to creating a symbol and choosing a colour, conversations like those below were documented for all of our expectations. These small group conversations illustrate the debate and powers of persuasion the children used in attempting to capture the most representative symbol and appropriate colour. These discussions provided the children with the opportunity to actively practice each of our expectations. They also illustrate the depth of thought the children put into our expectations, considering different options and perspectives along the way.

**Look after nature and the environment: a conversation regarding the symbol.**

Teacher: When you are thinking of nature and the environment, what do you think of?

*Child 1: Bugs, like ladybugs.*

*Child 2: Ants, bees, flowers, trees and bushes.*

*Child 3: Insects.*

*Child 4: Spiders, beetles and equipment.*

*Child: 2: No, that's not nature. Plants. Like the bean and lettuce plants.*

*Child 4: Okay, the sun.*

*Child 2: That's not living. It doesn't move.*

*Child 3: Yes it does. The sun moves during the day. It moves across the sky and when it's night we're upside down. And then there's the moon.*

*Child 1: Trees give humans air and bugs food and air.*

*Child 2: Forests of trees are nature.*

Teacher: Reflecting on the thoughts you have shared, what do you think best tells us we need to think about nature and why?

*Child 3: Spiders because they are nature. They make webs and they eat flies.*

*Child 2: Trees because they give nature oxygen and they are nature. They give us and animals oxygen.*

*Child 1: When I see a worm it reminds me of nature because worms don't have eyes and they still know where they are going.*

*Child 2: But if we don't have trees, nothing could breathe. Everything would die and we don't want that to happen.*

*Child 3: But not only trees are nature.*

*Child 2: We know that spiders are nature. If we didn't have any tree though everyone would be dead. There would be no spiders and no worms.*

*Child 3: Worms are good because they eat all old scraps and old scraps are not supposed to be wasted.*

*Child 2: You could just clean it up.*

*Child 1: But you can't eat scraps.*

*Child 3: Trees also have one of the hardest jobs in the world because they have to look after everything. You shouldn't cut down trees when they are alive, but when they are dead you can cut them down and use the wood to make paper.*

*Child 1: Trees need oxygen too. Trees and plants are the same thing. They all give oxygen. We take the oxygen. Even the bugs take the oxygen. That's why trees need oxygen too because otherwise they will just die.*

*Child 3: So basically it just goes around in circles.*

*Child 2: Yeah, so one tree will give another one oxygen and then another and then another one.*

*Child 1: I think we should do a tree for the symbol.*

*Child 2: I agree.*

*Child 3: Me too.*

*Child 4: Yeah, I think a tree should be the symbol.*

The children were clearly trying to make sense of their world around them and how everything fits together, taking their conversation back to the core of their understandings about nature and our relationship with it. Their choice of a tree to symbolise 'Looking after nature and the environment' encompasses their understanding of the value of nature and what might be apparent without it.

The children engaged in similar conversations when choosing a colour to represent each of our expectations. The below conversation illustrates the children's thoughts of what friends are and mean to them. They demonstrate that friends are something they hold close to their heart and represent the concept of having love for those important to them.

### **Make friends and let others play: a conversation regarding the colour.**

*Child 1: Making friends and letting others play with me makes me feel happy.*

*Child 2: It makes me feel comfortable because I let other people play with me and all my other friends.*

*Child 3: It makes me feel good. I think skin colour. It makes me feel happy because I like making friends and that's the colour my friends are.*

*Child 1: I think blue for the sky because it shines on us when we are playing.*

*Child 3: I actually think it should be red for your heart because you're thinking about it in your heart when you are making friends. Red is also for love. You love the game you are playing with your friends and you love your friends.*

*Child 1: Red because when you are running and playing it feels nice.*

*Child 2: I think red because lots of things are red and when you're running your heart beeps.*

*Child 3: You can't hear it.*

*Child 1: You can just feel it.*

*Child 1: We all think red.*

*Child 3: Because red is the colour of your heart.*

*Child 1: And when you're making friends you use your heart. You need to decide together what you are going to play. You can't play together if you can't decide on a game.*

### **Modeling and Voicing Our Expectations**

With all the discussion and development of our classroom expectations, I was confident that the children were beginning to take ownership over their behaviours and the expectations they had developed. What's more, the children had begun to use their own statements when interacting with their peers. They were reminding one another to behave in a positive manner and checking that they were behaving appropriately according to the expectations. They were adopting the language of their expectations. 'You are not listening to me. Please don't interrupt'. 'You are not respecting my learning'. 'Be careful with the beetles. You don't want to squash them'.

I was also mindful of modeling the expectations in my teaching, making sure I gave children time to reflect and share their thinking; that I took time to listen to their stories and show that I was interested in what they had to contribute; that I had concern for the environment and how to take care of it; and while I would be there to facilitate altercations that might arise, I expected the children to take charge and problem solve with one another. I also made a conscious effort to frequently refer to the expectations within our daily engagements. I reminded the children of their expectations with subtle comments and have them reflect on their actions. 'Are you respecting nature when you pull the leaves off the tree?' 'Are you supporting your friends when they ask for your help?' 'Where do you think a better place for your rubbish might be?'

While the children were now noticing how others were behaving, beginning to reflect on their own actions and considering the choices they were making more thoughtfully, there were still many challenges where children were being inconsiderate, impulsive or careless.

With all the discussion and work we had done, I was unsure as to whether the children did in fact really value the expectations they had developed. There were still children being left out of play, jumpers being lost and learning being disrespected. There had to be a way to make the expectations the children had established more visible so that the children would become more entrenched in their behaviour.

### **Becoming a living entity**

In order to make the expectations we had created over the last few months visible in the room, we began by re-visiting the many discussions we had had. The value statements and symbols were coupled with the colours chosen by the children to represent each expectation and put up on the wall as a daily reminder for the children to read, reflect upon and use. These were also used along with each of the positive behavioural statements made by the children to produce books for the children to read and borrow. I began to receive feedback from parents that children were using our expectations at home amongst their family, such as reminding siblings to clean up after themselves, or parents to please listen to them when they are sharing their discoveries. Our expectations were now becoming a living entity within our classroom and were also being transferred into the children's lives outside of school. I felt that they were beginning to make an increasing impact on the children today and in turn I was comforted that they would help the development of lifelong values.

As their reflections were developing, the children were also beginning to assume greater responsibility for their individual learning where many began to discuss the importance of concentrating on their work and making sure they 'had a go' without disrupting others. The children were now identifying the importance of having to take responsibility for how they

engaged themselves in their own learning. They were demonstrating an ability to independently employ their skills and take pride in their efforts.

As the two years have progressed, we have continued to question one another with regards to these expectations. Instead of telling someone they are not respecting the learning of others, we are asking, “are you respecting the learning of others?” at a particular point in time. The change in behaviour has been interesting to observe where a child who might be continuously touching or talking to a peer during learning times, realises that they have not been mindful of the impact their actions might be having on others when another child turns around and asks them to ‘*stop, I’m trying to listen*’.

Throughout our journey, I have also pondered other perspectives. I have wondered whether the children had thoughts about what the school might expect from them and how these might differ from the expectations we had created within the classroom. I posed my questions to the children...

### **What do you think the school expects from you while you are at school?**

*To be nice to people.*

*To not leave your bag on the floor for someone to trip over if there’s a fire.*

*Don’t hurt other children.*

*To not swear because it’s bad to swear.*

*The boss of the school wants everybody to respect the school. Like if someone breaks something then that’s not respecting the things in the school.*

*Listen to other people. And don’t talk on top of people.*

*Following the rules of the school. If you don’t follow the rules you might get in trouble.*

### **Looking at the ‘rules’**

Interestingly, the concept of ‘rules’ had not ever been a focus in any of our discussions. In this instance the children were viewing expectations as rules, however this is not how I wanted to portray the socially acceptable behaviours that we were discussing. My thought was that a ‘rule’ suggested that there is a particular behaviour that is obligatory, where there is no room for discussion or questions. This in turn does not mean that the children necessarily internalise and understand why certain behaviours are more appropriate and acceptable than others. I wanted rather for the children to have ownership over how they interacted with one another and their environment. I wanted them to explore possibilities and to create solutions to problems that arose with positive discussion, thought and understanding rather than being told that ‘this is how it is’. While it was only one child in

this instance that had chosen to interpret Expectations as being 'rules' but I felt that it was important to uncover further.

Tell me more about the rules.

*Don't snatch other people's things when they're playing with them.*

*Don't ruin peoples work.*

*Don't fight each other and use your words.*

*Look after your things. Like your jumpers and the library and take home books when you're at home. Everything you need to bring to school look after it at home and at school.*

*If you hurt somebody you can't just run away from them you need to say sorry.*

*Say the truth because it means you are a good friend.*

Again, it appeared that the children's thoughts reflected much of what they had earlier identified as being important in establishing acceptable and respectful interactions; however they expressed their thoughts on a much larger scale. They were having to incorporate a community body; a body that includes not only teachers and children on mass, but also *the boss of the school* and perhaps strangers. Certain values in regards to stealing, cheating and respecting rules together with common expectations within our society were being brought to the discussion. I wondered where the children had developed these ideas.

### **Why have expectations?**

I also considered whether the children had an understanding of why we have expectations of people and why they are important? And does this cause us to modify or change certain behaviours? In early conversations, I noticed that there was a lot of discussion amongst the children of people getting told off, or getting angry or getting in trouble, where their responses were based on the effect on them as individuals. Again, I wanted the children to think beyond this. Why did someone, a parent or teacher perhaps get angry at a particular behaviour? I encouraged the children to consider the different perspectives that others may have and the impact their behaviours might have on a larger scale and within a wider community.

Why is it important to have expectations?

*So the school will be happy and safe.*

*So people know how to respect the classroom.*

*We have to have expectations so that people respect the school.*

*If we didn't have expectations this world would be not comfortable. It would be a bad world.*

*We have expectations because we need us to learn. Like listening. Then you will know what to do.*

*To help us do the right thing.*

*So the world can be better.*

It became clear to me that the children's understandings had developed much more deeply than I had expected.

### **Reflections**

When sharing and exploring the flow of our investigations with my colleagues, there are times when it is easy to become overwhelmed with the flood of questions, considerations and possibilities that present themselves. However, it is important to not become consumed by them and to keep your purpose in sight. My purpose has been to develop a set of common expectations that we are each accountable for. In doing so, it has been important to develop a deeper understanding of how we, both teachers and students can demonstrate positive behaviours and become increasingly conscious of our actions and interactions towards others. With all their experience already, our youngest school age children have not had the vast experiences that we as adults have had to establish skills for coping with different situations and people. It is therefore our responsibility as adults and educators to provide the children we nurture with a safe environment to practise and develop these skills with opportunities to respond to and reflect on different circumstances that they encounter.

After reflecting on our questions and discussions, there is no doubt that the children had become increasingly aware of how expectations are assumed in different contexts. There is however still many unanswered questions and as one is answered, another opens itself up for exploring... What do the children expect from the school? What do the children think the teachers expect from them? What do parents expect from the children at home? How do the values that we place in each instance overlap and compliment one another or in fact change in different contexts or with different groups? Should we expect a different set of values in different contexts and how do we assume they are learned and valued by all individuals?

Furthermore, I wondered how the children's responses to these questions might have been influenced by other factors such as teachers and parents? If we let the children develop without expectations placed on them from an early age, would they place the same importance for the expectations they have developed? How have we shaped their idea of what being a socially conscious community member really is? I accept this concept could be irreversible and unchangeable as in order to interact and sustain the respectful relationships

we develop though life we have already, from our first day of being, been influenced by our environments and those that cross it, with their values, morals and own expectations. It is how we demonstrate these values and morals to our children that become important in encouraging and developing their resilience in the interactions that they experience.

I am not suggesting that the children in my class are more respectful and considerate of others or engage themselves in a more responsible manner, they are after all still only six and seven years old. As adults, we are constantly developing and adding to our own value system at different points in our lives from the experiences and influences we encounter. However having made the children a part of the process of developing a set of common expectations for everyone in our community to employ, I have observed a shift and greater awareness in their attitudes towards one another and how they interact both at school and outside of school. There are still times when I wonder why it seems so difficult for the children to appreciate and engage the expectations we have developed. We still have instances when the children become frustrated or find it difficult to understand the perspective of another person, however they are becoming increasingly open minded and keen to seek their peers opinions on particular matters. It has also helped in creating a learning community where everyone lends a hand and will assist those requiring additional support.

I have also observed a shift in my own teaching. As a beginning teacher there was once perhaps an urgency to command control over what can at times be a chaotic environment. However, with experience, my command has become more of a purposeful facilitation of calm order through the use of the expectations that the children and I have established together. It has not been a quick and easy process. It has taken time to develop these common expectations that the children understand and are able to follow. It has taken thoughtful reflection in regards to how to explore and implement each stage. It has been a collaborative affair between my class community, as well as my colleagues. Together we have scrutinised, considered, interpreted documentation and evidence and unpacked our thoughts. Their opinions have been thoughtfully regarded and used to develop and extend the thinking of the children. However, as a result, our expectations have become a living entity within our classroom that are constantly evolving. They are constantly being discussed, reflected upon and revisited with the children to remind them of the very expectations they created and have for one another. Their visibility in the room makes the children all the more accountable to them. The children have persevered in making their voices heard and have been constantly encouraged to express themselves to one another.