



Great Start's Bright Spot Campaign: Bees, sunflowers and growing community connections.

Location: Great Start, Taita.

Theme: Community Building

Growing community happens all the time. Mostly when we are not looking! In Taita, children have been growing community along with sunflowers.

Having fun can be a great way of learning. Not only that but it can also be a really effective way to build connections to the environment and people around us. In Taita, children have been having fun planting sunflowers in less than beautiful spaces – on verges, along fences and in parks as well as back and front yards. Not surprisingly the sunflowers have been noticed by many people. So while the children have been learning a lot about how sunflowers grow, the importance of bees and what they can do to protect bee populations, they have also been learning how they can use sunflowers to help not only bees but also their community through 'the Bright Spot' campaign.

The Bright Spot campaign was designed by the Great Start Taita children's gardening club. This club came about as a spin-off from a free earth-based holiday programme that was run in spring 2010. The prerequisite for participation in the holiday programme was that each child brought along a parent or big helper so connections with local families and wider whanau were initiated too. The

Great Start garden was already established but had some new life breathed into it by working with the ideas and designs of these children and parents who came up with many innovative ways of growing food other than in straight lines. Pumpkins, for example, were grown up trees, beans become tunnels and mosaic paths and decorations using broken old plates were created. As well, a huge circular gifting garden in the design of a sun ray was planted so the children could grow and then give away their produce to others in the community.

The 25 or so children involved in the gardening club have their ideas nurtured and supported by Great Start. This nurturing led to the idea of giving and receiving quickly growing into the Bright Spot Campaign – a campaign to create beautiful spaces and plantings in the local community. In spring 2010, hundreds of sunflower seedlings were planted through the streets and backyards of Taita by the children and their adult helpers to make their community more beautiful. Attached to these living works of art was a small note to let the community know that the sunflowers were a gift from local children.

And with the planting of the sunflowers, something magical happened: the sunflowers generated pride and joy in the children, and in the wider community. A local Dad joined in by growing almost two hundred sunflowers along the back of his property for the train commuters to enjoy as they went past. Residents who had the sunflowers planted outside their homes had a reason to chat to each other over the fence and some families added other flowers to their plots and encouraged their own children to water and look after them. The lessons in caring and nurturing along the street became more and more obvious to everyone that walked up and down. Not only did the plantings not get vandalised as had been predicted, but the project also supported residents to build connections with each other and with their physical environment. Connections have also been built with a local beekeeper, Al Kilminster, who was keen to work with the Taita community in establishing a local beekeeping group. Working with Al, the children learned about the importance of bees, and their current plight.

Growing community happens in many ways and, as Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996) say, creativity and play can help foster hospitality, belonging, ownership and discovery. In the Bright Spot campaign's case, all of these things are happening in Taita and the connections continue to expand!

Now, the children involved have realised that sunflower planting could help other children to make their communities beautiful too, while building connections between people and bees to help ensure the survival of the bee population. This has since led to another connection with a heritage seed company, Eco Seeds because this season (2011) the Bright Spot campaign has turned into Project Sunshine and it is going national!

Key learnings

- Transforming community can start small, and doesn't have to be expensive. Extending an idea that is already working well (gardening and the garden club) to other spaces gets the idea noticed and shows others that a little effort can make a big difference.
- Sometimes all it takes is one person and their passion to get things rolling. Notice the people and their passions around you and invest in those.
- Allow all kinds of people, including children to contribute and to lead. We all have our own talents, abilities and perspectives and bringing them together in a shared project strengthens that project in terms of relevance, resilience and fun!
- By challenging the unexamined assumptions that we hold (regarding vandalism and communities not caring for example) and by giving children support to follow up their ideas,

the Taita children were able to take a leadership role in showing how Taita is and can be beautiful.

- Most activities provide opportunities for multiple learnings and outcomes, and often these are different to different people involved. Creating ways to understanding these multiple learnings helps us to design what comes next in ways that can involve and benefit even more people.

Key outcomes

- A stronger connection to nature and specific knowledge about sunflowers and bees for Taita children.
- A more beautiful place for everyone in Taita to live in.
- Sustenance for bees.
- Growing leadership, generosity and pride amongst the children and wider community.
- Stronger community connections between the children and key supporters, including businesses and residents.
- More children have joined in...Gardening Club is now considered cool! We have 25 children involved regularly now, and the new challenge will is to manage the numbers that want to join 😊.

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Reference

Wheatley, M and Kellner-Rogers, M. 1996. *A Simpler Way*. BK Books, San Francisco.

Story by Denise Bijoux and Julia Milne, 2012.