

Magic can happen...

By Enid Elliot, Sukhvir Sidhu, and Toni Tata

Working with students over the years, I have accumulated a fund of stories—stories of success and failure, humorous stories and sad stories. Sometimes, stories are inspiring and illuminating, even magical, such as the following one. Last summer I had a student and practicum supervisor who supported and inspired each other; their synergy becoming more than the usual student-supervisor dynamic. Watching their story unfold inspired me to write this article with the student, Toni, and her on-site supervisor, Sukhvir.

Practicum is at the heart of early childhood education. Students put into practice the theories they have read about and discussed; real children and situations challenge those theories. Most practica evolve in a predictable manner. Childcare programs enjoy the students and students successfully complete the requirements. My contact with the programs and the students is usually fun and instructive for all. Learning from the supervisors of preschools and daycare centres, learning from the students, observing the children I have a good time.

Toni was an experienced preschool teacher who had not finished the requirements for licensing in British Columbia; she was working with Pacific Rim Early Childhood Institute to complete her basic level ECE certificate. Challenging her final practicum last summer, she was doing the final six-week course in only three weeks. Living outside of town she traveled in from Sooke, a bus ride of an hour, to work in a daycare in Victoria.

Sukhvir, the director of Centennial Day care, and other staff members, welcomed Toni for her three-week practicum. As Toni said, “Sukhvir was welcoming, generous, and supportive.” Indeed Sukhvir was, recognizing an energy and creativity in Toni that inspired her own; together, they created a magical time for the children.

“Pots and pans started it.” By the end of the first week, through observation and interaction, Toni was aware of how much the children were enjoying their time outside.

Inside, the centre was chopped into small rooms that were cozy and created intimacy on a rainy afternoon, but on warm summer days, the inside seemed to constrict a free flow of open-ended play. In summer, the outside offered more space, more light, and more possibilities. Toni decided to enrich the sand box. Watching the children she found her cue.

On the **Monday** of the second week, the children painted three large cardboard boxes outside, as part of an art project, and began using them outside as stoves, microwaves, ovens, and refrigerators. Toni decided to bring in utensils and dishes to extend the play.

Tuesday—Even though she traveled on the bus, she managed to bring with her two teakettles, eight plates, eight cups, eight bowls, some loaf pans, a cake tin, a stewing kettle, trays, muffin tins, and ladles. She wanted plenty of utensils to allow for all the children to participate. Planning for tactile diversity, and aware that the centre served a variety of families, she also brought wooden rice paddles and woks, silver soup spoons and spatulas, serving spoons, big steel and aluminum pots and a few frying pans to use. All of this on the bus.

As Toni tells it, she put the kitchenware in the sandbox “with the help of a young lad who lined up all the utensils, pots, pans, dishware, etc, end to end on the lip of the sandbox to practically surround the entire sand area. He stood back with seeming pride and with a sweeping gesture announced there were 36 items. Keeping him from diving in until his classmates came out to join him and see what a great job he had done was an effort. Luckily, it was only a minute or two.” The children were thrilled.

As sometimes happens, energy and enthusiasm at this centre was at a low ebb. Staff felt discouraged by the recent cuts to the program, reflective of what was happening provincially. Sometimes government policies aimed at creating different programs or saving money create work environments that undermine and discourage early childhood educators. Child care staff can be valiant in the face of low wages, few resources, and little societal recognition, but governments at all levels need to consider what impacts their new policies have in light of the effects at the human level.

Toni was a fresh influence in the centre, focused on her practicum and full of ideas. Paying attention to the children, she had detected their need for some new materials and approaches, thus she had decided that a large supply of kitchenware in the sandbox might encourage play and co-operation.

At first, co-operation among the children was difficult because everyone wanted to play with everything. One little fellow, seeing all the fabulous “new stuff”, lined up eighteen utensils on the sandbox seats and considered them “mine!” Toni spent time the first day explaining that the kitchenware would be there for many days and that there would be lots of time to play with it. She suggested children pick the items they needed at the moment, and reminded them that everyone would get a turn. The children’s skills in the art of negotiation, talking, and listening took a huge jump as they arrived at a number of interesting deals and schemes.

Wednesday--Sukhvir began to expand on Toni’s ideas the next day. Under a big tree, she brought out the pots and pans and the idea of a restaurant began to grow. It became a beehive of activity as the children began to co-operate with each other. A table was dragged underneath the tree to make the restaurant, now called *The Treehouse Restaurant*, complete with a sign put on the tree, and the kids began to plan and write menus. .

Sukhvir told me that the children began to classify the jobs that needed doing at the restaurant. One child said, “I’ll be the cook.” Soon there were waiters and waitresses. One girl said, “I’ll be the manager.” Another child announced that he was not working; “it’s my day off.” There was lots of discussion about food and favorite recipes. Menus were written and used in the restaurant. The children began to describe recipes to Sukhvir, who ran inside to get paper so that she or the children could write the recipes down. There was a great deal of fun and laughter. Sukhvir said the energy and intensity with which the children undertook this play was difficult to describe, but that she could not have generated it; the impetus came from the children and the energy grew and expanded as the ideas did.

Thursday afternoon was hot. Sukhvir wrote:

Staff put the wading pool outside for the children to splash and cool off. Some children asked me if they could bring the cooking dishes to the pool area as they had had so much fun with them in the morning. We brought the dishes and small picnic bench to the pool area. In one small pool some children were playing with plastic fish and crabs. One girl was busy playing with the dishes, then she spotted the fish and crabs. She said excitedly, "We have to have a barbecue. We are going to cook fish and crabs."

A couple of the other children joined her. They started picking out fish and crabs and put them in cooking utensils. One girl said, "We need some sauce for the fish." She started picking grass, leaves, and dirt and put them in a container and then shook it. Another child said, "You need mint in the sauce." Nearby a boy was mixing dirt and water in a bucket. I asked him what he was making. "Chocolate sauce!" was his answer.

There was a lot of enthusiasm and energy as food was being prepared. Suddenly one girl said, "We need a pool party." A couple of other children said, "Yes, we need a pool party."

They asked me if they could decorate the place. So I provided them with streamers and dry hydrangeas from my garden. Soon they were decorating the tree branches with streamers and flowers. One girl said, "We need music." So we brought music outside. One child said "We need to make a sign for the pool party." I asked them what they wanted to put in the sign.

Pool party
Bring your swim suit and sunscreen and a hat.
Also bring your own towel.
Maybe bring some extra clothes.
You will get fish, crabs, and chocolate sauce.

They invited the children from the pool to join them. We had a wonderful pool party with decorations, music, and great food!

Toni and Sukhvir had discussed the possibility of including the morning snack in the "restaurant". On the **Monday** of the third week the theme moved indoors where a room was set up as a restaurant. *The Treehouse Restaurant* sign was taped on the door of the room with the addition of a sign which read "today's special—rotis". Sukhvir came with dough prepared and showed the children how to make rotis. The children chose toppings of cream cheese, jam, peanut butter or fresh fruit for their rotis, and then acted as the waiters, waitresses or the maitre d' who seated folks.

There was an energy and excitement in the air that kids and teachers could feel. Toni and Sukhvir were picking up on the children's ideas and expanding on them. The two

of them were sparking each other, enjoying the synergy. Everyone was having fun, which then sparked more ideas.

During Toni's second week there had been discussions of the beach and beachlife. Besides bringing in a load of kitchenware Toni had brought in beach material, shells, rocks, starfish to share with the children. She had created a display on the science table. In keeping with Toni's display, Sukhvir had put the toy fish and crabs back in the wading pools during the second week. This topic had led Toni to make starfish shortbread. *Today's Special—starfish cookies* was the sign for **Tuesday**, where Toni and the children made shortbread cookies from scratch. Wanting all the children to have a chance at making the cookies she did it five times with five children each time. The kids started with starfish cookies and then they created whales and other shapes that fit the beach/sea theme, and some shapes of their own creation.

Meanwhile, Sukhvir and Toni had the idea of turning the block room, where the science table was set up, into an undersea garden. Sukhvir began to plan a mural. One five year old girl in their program particularly loved a wide expanse of paper on which to paint, and brought a passion to her painting. Children helped this girl with creating the ocean mural based on the book *Swimmy*, one of the children's favorites. The mural hung on the wall and other staff members helped the children hang sea creatures they had made, including jellyfish, sharks, seaweed, and other marvels.

At the end of the day, two children wanted the recipe for the cookies to take home. One of these children was new to the centre and with the recipe this boy was able to share his day and his centre with his family.

Today's Special—Pancakes! For **Wednesday**, pancakes were on the menu. Sukhvir and one of the children (the girl who had been instrumental in the mural painting) made the room look beautiful by covering the tables with easel paper for tablecloths, putting out place settings of plates and forks and a vase of flowers in the middle.

As Toni described it, "there was one young boy in particular, large in stature for his age, who loved to wrestle, run and 'play large'". He rolled into the room, grabbed a chair

and stopped, seemingly in awe of those flowers with their lovely fragrance. With incredible delicacy he tentatively touched the blossoms with fingertips and exhaled the words, “these are beautiful”. I am constantly reminded by small episodes like these not to pre-judge and slot... children surprise you every time!”

Today's Special—Pizza. Friday was the last day of Toni's practicum. Having pizza in their classroom restaurant, Sukhvir decided a follow-up visit to a pizza restaurant was a possibility for the following week. Toni was sad to be leaving, as so much had happened in three weeks. Besides a field trip, there were now plans for a recipe book of the marvelous meals concocted by the children. Sukhvir said, “We made a recipe book with the children's recipes. The recipes were exotic but very unhealthy, with lots of sugar, butter, and chocolate. We can't publish them as they might harm your health.” Toni remembered an example of a recipe, “One bowl of candy, add ketchup, put them in the microwave for two minutes, then eat them up.”

The interaction between Toni and Sukhvir as they inspired and informed each other created a wonderful experience for the children. Sukhvir felt that she and Toni were “doing a dance with the children.” The ideas came from the children, but she and Toni acted on the ideas and expanded on them. During that three weeks I looked forward to my weekly visit to get caught up in the excitement and thinking which was being generated. As Toni acknowledges, “had they [the children] not embraced and been open to the ideas placed before them, we could not write this article.”

What a gift for all when sparks of creativity and excitement elevates a practicum to the level of dance. What happened was the result of careful observation of the children, responsiveness to the children's interests, and being present to the emergence of the children's excitement. But there was an added element in the way that Sukhvir welcomed Toni's participation and ideas; the conversations between supervisor and student showed an enjoyment and celebration of the children. This shared joy in the children and their capabilities created an excitement that was magical. Toni wanted the children included as authors on this article and indeed the magic resides in the children.