Memory

A closer look at the Transformation of the Mind’s eye
How do children come to know themselves? How does this relationship of knowing, inseparable from memory, intensify their connection to the world and each other?
From the day we are born, we depend on our senses to interpret the world around us – people, places, experiences, life. Our senses are the first layer of transforming the physical realm into the internal, abstract realm of cognition. Yet, without a memory of all that our senses take in, our life story would cease to exist. Every act of thinking relies on our ability to remember.

When you listen closely to the words of children, you will often hear them saying, “Remember when…” or “I remember…” Knowing that remembering plays such a pivotal role in learning and life, we began to wonder if developing a relationship between the seeing eye and the mind’s eye could enhance or intensify the composition and nuances of better memories.

We began to search for the elements of a memory that are the anchors in making a memory lasting and took this challenge to our parents during their first parent night meeting.

Think of a memory from your childhood. What was it about that memory that made it stand out above all the other memories?

This is what they came up with:

* intensity of emotions  *a beloved pet  *season
* environment  *a conversation  *picture
* food  *surprise  *landmarks
* taste  *weather  *touch
* smell  *a voice  *song
* a place  *simplicity of life  *memories triggering other memories
Encoding is the first critical step in processing a new memory. The anchors discussed fall into the categories of:

- **acoustic** encoding-sounds, words and other auditory input
- **tactile** encoding- involving the sense of how something feels, normally through touch
- **visual** encoding- visual sensory information
- **gustatory** encoding- involving the sense of taste
- **olfactory** encoding- involving the sense of smell
- **semantic** encoding-applied to a particular context

Knowing how a memory is encoded affects the creation of a memory. Could we heighten the experience by having children think about the different ways the brain internalizes the world around them? We decided to foster a notion of collaboration by creating a shared memory together where all members of the group work together to find and collect different parts of the same memory.

We tossed the challenge to the children on their first research trip to Mānoa Market Place Farmers’ Market. In groups of 5 and 6, the children were asked to collect 4 kinds of memories: seeing memories, hearing memories, smelling memories, and touching memories. We left out tasting memories to be collected during day 2 of our collective memory experience. The encoding of a memory was our main focus.

Would this intentionality sensitize their thinking about the process and act of “catching a memory and putting it into their brain”?

This is what we noticed…

When children encounter a space for the first time, just like beginning a new topic of study, each child comes to this experience with a multitude of prior knowledge and experiences different from their peers. The ability of having this knowledge to begin with would not be possible without the capability of memory and the role that it plays in our ability to learn from the past. The ability to draw from these past experiences is an essential component of a learning community, because when they share these bits and pieces with each other, together the sum becomes greater than all the parts combined.
L.O. said, “If you look out on the other side, you can see the tented house.” There was none at the exact time she said it, but sure enough, a few seconds later we passed the tented house covered for extermination. Having driven past there before, there was something about this landmark that anchored itself in her memory.

T.C.- had a memory of a school bus that she had ridden at her previous preschool. She remembered that “riding on a big bus is fun because it bumps a lot.”

J.M.- said, “I come here with my mommy. I go to Safeway.”
All of these statements seem so simple and matter-of-fact, but if we stop and think about all the steps involved in remembering a place — the walls, the surrounding structures, the ground, the trees, the signs, the sights, sounds, and smells — all of this and more, then the autonomic function of remembering becomes so much more complex than we give it credit for on a daily basis. On a conscious level, the children were pointing out the various memories they were searching for, in essence, they were making visible elements of the experience that were also the possible anchors of this memory in the making.

K.O. -“I smell garlic.”
Relying on a previous memory of association with the properties of garlic. It would have been interesting to hear the string of memories linked to this distinguishable aroma.

Ey.E.- I have this (tomatoes) at home.

-It smells like mint.

E.C.- That’s (peppers) what Lucia eats.
C.L.- It’s smooth.
J.F.- “I found a smelling memory.”

L.O.- “A touching memory.”
A.V.- “That’s Rambutan.”

A.V.- “Peaches are a smelling memory.”

A sound/song memory.
A seeing memory.

A touching memory.

T.K. A cucumber looks like a sidewalk with grass on it.
T.L. “I feel the windy wind blowing.”

“The rocks are like shattering.”

Meeting a new friend.

“A seeing memory.”
“A hearing memory.”
These acts of remembering, connecting the past to the present, is an inseparable aspect of perception as the physical world filters through the mind’s eye. What the children have said here is not unique to this one experience. Children make these connections all the time. What had changed about their thinking around this particular experience was their interpretation of what they were seeing, hearing, smelling and feeling into a type of memory. The intentionality of noticing was deepened by their newfound relationship between their senses and memories.

The Unexpected

Often, the element of the unexpected surfaces while in the midst of our encounters with the children. On this day, it was the influence of memory on their senses. This was evident in the children’s displacement of sensorial memories of past experiences upon the present. One group said, “a hearing memory” while looking at a dog, but the dog was not making any sound. Another, calling out “a smelling memory” while looking at the orchid plants, before even smelling the actual flower that barely had a scent. Other examples of this was made visible as they sought out different types of memories. The search for a sound memory led some children to the red cinder stone gravel area in the middle of the open market. They had not actually heard the rocks making a sound yet, but had predicted that it would when they came into contact with it. While running across the rocks, one child said, “The rocks are like shattering!” Another child noticed a cardboard box and rectangular piece. He bent down and placed the rectangular piece at a sloping angle against the box and began rolling rocks down the ramp. He was making his memory of prior work with blocks and other materials visible in this ordinary yet extraordinary moment. The children had in these several instances abandoned the realm of their immediate senses and allowed memory and metacognition to come together.
Making their mind’s eye yet again visible.

The following day, the culmination of their collaborative efforts at Mānoa’s open market became a culinary experience with Chef Serino back at Mid-Pacific. The children, along with the help of Chef Serino and parents, created their very own edible masterpieces. Each ingredient, adding to the layers of the pizza, was a metaphor for the composition of memory. As the children came into contact with the dough, just as a sculptor begins to manipulate clay, the dough became the blank canvas full of potential, upon which each ingredient would be intentionally chosen and placed. Some were created with their own desires in mind. Some, crafted for a loved one.

Each of the senses represented in the palette of fresh ingredients set before them. As they sat beside each other connected by the memories of the previous day, and sharing the joy of the present moment, they would soon be enjoying the fruits of their labor, in what they called, “a tasting, smelling memory.”
Preschool Memories