

SPECIAL

Special involved forty-four refugees and immigrant kids from the Western English Language School (WELS), working with renowned Australian photographer, Nicola Loder. The project recognised the diversity and complexity of the personal stories of those at WELS, aged between 5 and 18 years, and who have come from 15 different language backgrounds representing a myriad of cultural backgrounds and experiences.

Because of language and cultural barriers, these stories are sometimes either not relayed or drastically simplified. But photography is a means of uncovering some of these experiences and stories. It's accessible and popular. With the support of Kodak, we distributed disposable cameras to the students who were to photograph what was special to them in their new lives in Australia. Using instamatics was cheap and easy and it meant that even the younger students were able to achieve great results with little prior instruction.

Two primary and two secondary classes were involved in the project, mixing abilities and learning backgrounds. Some students were completing their studies while others were just beginning. Some students had attended school before coming to Australia, others had not. But in all cases, the kids own experiences represented through photography made the language and literacy learning - process more interesting and relevant.

Over a five-week period, Nicola introduced the participants to cameras and photography. In the first session they were given free reign. After being shown how to hold the camera so as not to cover the lens, the kids, working in pairs, set out around the school and photographed 'whatever they liked'. There was a wild flurry of shooting. The field of vision for the younger students was bright and immediate. There were close-ups of friends, teachers and play equipment. Some of the older kids framed or enacted their wishes: the 'perfect' slam dunk was snapped, exciting headers in front of the soccer goals, and many students pretended to opening the driver's door to a red Porsche.

Everyone was pretty excited to see the photos developed from the first week of shooting. When asked to choose their favourite photograph many kids selected one that featured them. It took some work on the part of Nicola and the classroom teachers to convince them that they were the photogrpahers, not the subjects and that it was their photos that we were interested in.

During subsequent weeks Nicola showed the students other photographic skills: how and when to use a flash (if it's used outside as well as inside, brighter more brilliant results are achieved); some basic concepts of distance in photography (a close-up is no more than an arms length between the camera and the subject); and framing (a plain background, the sky, the grass, a tin shed wall or a busy

background). Nicola also allowed the children to experiment with moving subjects and combining all these different aspects together.

Of course what is 'special' is not easily grasped with limited English. It was explained to the kids as something they really, really liked; something that was important. Over the following weeks Nicola and the classroom teachers discussed how such a thing could be photographed. Cameras were taken home, to the local golf course, onto the bus, to the beach, down to the Maribyrnong River, to the local shopping centres, to the local park and to soccer matches. Families and friends, religious symbols, Saturday school classes, views from bedroom windows, televisions and microwave ovens, toys and pets were some of the things that counted as special in the lives of these kids.

Each week after the cameras were collected and the film developed, the photos were returned to the students who spoke and wrote about one or two images in class. Finally, images were chosen for the exhibition and the kids' comments on each photo were transcribed (interpreters were sometimes used). This is the text included in the exhibition.

I have taught some of these kids involved in the project for over a year and some for just a matter of weeks. The intimate stories documented through their photographs and the subsequent discussions around them revealed concealed dimension to their lives. I learnt how much many of these kids value their friends and families and some of the reasons why. The project also revealed some of the tragic events in their lives before coming to Australia. But, the most delightful thing for me, as a teacher and on-looker, was that photography allowed poetry to shine from those kids I would previously have thought were the least likely of producing it.