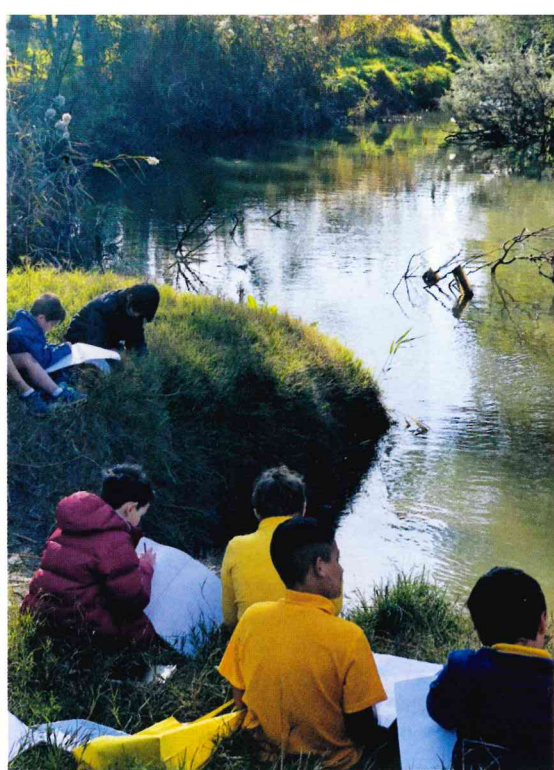




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(Scale Free Network) and Merri Creek
Management Committee



PARKING THE SCHOOL

LEARNING ABOUT COUNTRY FROM THE GROUND UP

WORDS ANGELA V FOLEY, SPECIAL ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS COORDINATOR,
MAKING OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS IN URBAN PARKLANDS

Not-for-profit organisation Merri Creek Management Committee has been a major contributor to Merri Creek's parklands becoming one of Melbourne's most treasured assets. Creekside parks in urban places also set the stage to meet the idea of Wurundjeri Country and local Aboriginal culture. It's a no-brainer to grasp the nearby ongoing reality of Country among the pockets of indigenous biodiversity in Merri Creek's parklands.

Although more people than usual flocked to Merri Creek's natural comforts of dappled light, birdsong and water during 2020's Covid-19 lockdowns, consider how most Australian children experience schooling in early years settings as well as primary and secondary school. They are places of learning dominated by synthetic materials. As a counterpoint, throughout 30 years of indigenous biodiversity restoration, Merri Creek Management Committee's staff have shown educative leadership with schools for many thousands of students in urban parks around Merri Creek. Just like parking the car, we park the school and walk away from conventional classrooms and their array of concrete and bitumen playgrounds.

This is no minor thing. For example, on average, Australian children spend about 800 hours per year for seven years in constructed primary school grounds, making up about 5600 hours

of childhood. As a leader for Merri Creek Management Committee's educative mission, I'm mindful of and responsive to educational developments. We use an age-old concept of learning together sometimes known as a "community of practice" for cooperative learning among and about nearby nature. We acknowledge where we are as Wurundjeri Country as we think through urban impacts on nature, local history and identity and build ecoliteracies of creek life and indigenous biodiversity. Our practice of learning and engagement harmonises with the Victorian Government's 2019 Education State vision, which asks for networks of educational leadership to share knowledge, experience and resources.

Many relationships between Merri Creek Management Committee and schools in the Merri Creek catchment stretch back over three decades of assembling alternative and ephemeral classrooms. We take pride in every occasion of leaving no footprint as we learn from the ground up.

In 2018, I was invited to share in the creation of an ambitious whole-of-school park-based learning program with Dr Sarita Gálvez for Moreland Primary School in suburban Coburg. Her idea was to create and coordinate a year-long cycle of learning through Country connected to nearby Merri Creek with an assembled cast of specialist educators.

On the surface, this initiative was familiar to me, being based on collaborative communities of practice in outdoor creekside settings.

With funding settled in 2018, we began in January 2019 in unchartered waters. Even though the school year had barely begun, a group of students across seven year levels (F-Grade 6) created and led a whole school assembly to announce the new project, through a performance of the saltwater-freshwater-saltwater life cycle of iuk (Woi wurrung for short-finned eel). In this way, we began with a shared sense of Wurundjeri Country and started to create a long series of cooperative learning plans with the school's educators that would take place mainly beyond Moreland Primary's school grounds.

The project became known as *Creekulum* — a play on words with curriculum. A core group of educators from Woi wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, Scale Free Network, Merri Creek Management Committee and others, including Aviva Reed and Adrienne Kneebone, began to flesh out and negotiate schedules and learning goals with school staff. Our sprawling ideas affected what we asked, who joined in conversations, and promised to influence what and how we shared what we were coming to know together.

However, the plan was not just

bigger than anything any of us had ever undertaken before (in that it would involve an entire school community across a year). At its heart were some very big concerns.

Some of Creekulum's big ideas were non-negotiable for a project that could be otherwise interpreted as walking to the creek for some environmental education. There was one very big idea, at the heart of what began as the Future makers and the Merri Merri Creek project, that Dr Gálvez always emphasised as "ecologies of knowledges".

Key to the ecologies of knowledges concept is the principle of democratising and decolonising learning, especially in relation to science. This came to mean that the small core of educators re-explored the nature of leading inquiry in the park for Creekulum. Gradually, questions about ecology, nature, history, environment and conservation were placed within a framework of *Country*. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, *Country* is a way of knowing home and being in relation to all living things. We needed to keep tangible and intangible matters at the front of our minds, such as watching out for Wurundjeri seasons and Woi wurrung language as we formed our own local stories to express belonging and

connection to Wurundjeri Country.

In these ways and more the student's January iuk performance was not just enthusiastic theatre. It was a student-led statement of student's interest in being part of making school learning and having a place and a voice in a community of practice. Their iuk storying signalled a student appetite for learning in the sense of ecologies of knowledges. It asserted their eagerness to embrace local Aboriginal knowledge in creative ways.

A big timetable for the year anticipated creekside learning for May and June with Years 1 and 2, July with Years 5 and 6, August and September with Years 3 and 4, and Preps in October. Other plans involved in-school related activities such as the school play, student exhibitions, student publications, and other aspects of inquiry.

In a low-tech, no impact model of emergent, relational colearning, we made and remade outdoor classrooms that connected Traditional Owners, one school community, the local Neighbourhood House, and parks beside Merri Creek. As we paid close attention to the formal school curriculum with the school's educators, we noticed Wurundjeri seasons in the heat, the rain and the wind, had surprising adventures with people, dogs, moths, flowers,

waterbugs, leaves, fire, microscopes, Tawny Frogmouths, soil macro organisms called nematodes, flooded gutters, and smoke! Students published a story book, several zines, made and hosted an in-school exhibition, and displayed the local creatures they made with local grasses and wool in the Moreland City Library. The annual school play came together like never before to celebrate over 60,000 years of people's local connections instead of the blinkered post-contact story of just 200 years.

What are Australian parks for? In environmental education circles when we refer to our skies, forests, oceans, deserts and wetlands, it is often in a commentary about loss of species, with narratives of fear, anxiety and trauma in response to climate emergencies and ecological crises. Through the Creekulum approach, when we walked the streets from school to our local urban park, we came to take pride in our place on Wurundjeri Country. We were out there so often in different configurations noticing nuances in what was around us. This drove fresh curiosity and new questions. It brought us joy, insight, connection, and a straight forward way to think about our identity. And we still left no footprint! ■



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