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“Seven days”

By Lia Timson*

Seven days in the snow with six children and four languages proved to be an extremely fruitful experience for us.

As far as informal education goes, our trip to the snowfields this year served not only to improve the children’s skiing skills, but also to cement their awareness of languages and their desire to learn more about them.

Three families, brought together by the friendship formed at a Northern Beaches child care centre four years ago, share a common (if not, natural) interest in languages.

One family is Belgium/French/German, another English/Australian (with South African and Dutch backgrounds) and ours Brazilian/Australian.

The two children in each family (ranging from two to seven years old) are used to their own family’s language habits as well as those of the other families through the times we spend together.

However, they had never experienced a live-in period when four languages – English, French, German and Portuguese – were so freely used. And where the home habits of each family were freely shared with all present.

Far from causing possible confusion and perhaps indifference among the children (after all, they could have not understood, or suitably pretend not to understand, if a command was applied with unfamiliar words), the languages brought joy and added interest to the children’s holiday.

Tired from skiing all day? Let’s read a book in Portuguese.

Too excited to settle down? Let’s watch a video in French.

Can’t wait for dinner? Let’s play a game in English.

Night time songs? Let’s try German.

Kids playing up? Talk to them in a language they don’t understand and watch the smiles creep up onto their mischievous faces.

For the adults it was sheer pleasure not only to indulge in language-switching among ourselves, but to watch the children have fun with languages and each other.

Oh! So cute to hear them proclaim ‘boa noite’ and ‘guten morgen’ every day.

It was also enriching to observe how respectful of other cultures children can be when they have personally experienced diversity. And how very tolerant they are of other children (and ski instructors) who come from places they have never heard of, displaying a myriad of accents.

We miss our holiday in the snow already, not just because of the skiing, but because we love to share our lives with like-minded friends and we love to see how all the hard work we put into teaching our children multiplicity is already paying off.

They are certainly growing up to be little global citizens and they won’t be short of words to greet those they meet along the way.

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