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UNITED NATIONS SUNDAY: THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN: HOW ARE WE DOING?

Part 2 by Karyn Callaghan

If we believe in children's intelligence, it changes us.

I have been an educator for over 30 years. I have worked with young children, studied pedagogy, and taught students of education. Through over half of those years, I had never been asked to articulate my view of the child. I had never asked myself how I view children. I had never asked my students how they view children. And then I began to learn about the programs for young children in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia that have been called the best in the world. The philosopher of these programs, Loris Malaguzzi, asks that revolutionary question, "What is your view of the child?" I have asked it many times since. I have yet to encounter anyone who replies that they see children as empty headed, as having feelings that are of no consequence, as needing to be managed, as needing to be doing and thinking what everyone else is doing and thinking at their age, as deserving to have no voice, and no rights. Yet when we look critically at our culture and our education system to ask ourselves what our practices reveal about the beliefs that must be behind them, it can be unsettling. I think we want to believe that we respect children. What would it look like if we did? What would be different? Ask that the next time you hear the words and actions of young children being described as "cute". Children are engaged in the serious work of trying to understand how the world works. They are curious, they notice things, they have theories, they are playful, they investigate - in other words, they demonstrate the inclinations and skills of scientists. They not only learn vocabulary at an astonishing rate, they are deducing the rules of grammar from conversation they hear. They are not incomplete adults. They are complete children, and complete citizens.

What if we believed that young children are creators of culture and have the right to the best early learning experiences, in settings that are aesthetically beautiful, complex, challenging, where they are seen as having interests that are worth pursuing, where they are supported to make their thinking visible in many ways so others can think and learn with them, and devoted our resources to creating these contexts of respect? Would our public debate about child care be different then? Would we be discussing it in terms of in terms of parental employment - or in terms of return on investment - as if children were walking talking RRSPs? Would we be obsessing over whether or not children are "ready for school", and instead be having serious public debate about whether schools are ready for children? What if we stopped talking about the needs of children, and instead seriously considered their rights?

In Reggio Emilia, children - preschool-aged children - are recognized as citizens. Decisions made in the municipality must be made through the lens of impact on children. There is a representative on their city council to articulate that perspective and advocate for children, but they are advocating to an informed council. Work done by the children in the preschools is incorporated into shop displays. For example a clay study of shoes in motion, showing the various stages of a stride was included in one shoe store window.

When the curtain in the opera theatre needed to be replaced, there was a public competition for the design. The preschool children in the Diana School submitted their idea, and it was selected. The design was created by the children and painted in quarter scale, then digitally enlarged so it could be applied to the flameproof fabric. Now, anyone who walks into the opera theatre in Reggio Emilia, the crown jewel of culture in any European city, what you see is this stunning curtain designed by the children, depicting a circle of life.

An American educator visiting Reggio was participating in an evening meeting with parents, where teachers presented insights and questions emerging from the recent project being undertaken by the children. During a break, she asked a 40-something man in a finely cut suit which class his child was in. He responded, "I don't have any children in this school". The visitor's surprise was noticeable – it was approaching midnight. "Then why are you here?" His response was one she will never forget – "I'm a citizen of Reggio Emilia. Child care is important."

A dramatic example to illustrate the view of children as citizens and creators of culture was described when I was part of study tour in Reggio in 2004. An American visitor asked how the centres had dealt with the aftermath of 9/11. If the question hadn't been asked, the story would not have been told – they saw it not as exemplary, but as just the way they live their lives with children.

- Meeting with parents to discuss how to respond
- Agreed not to engage in discussion with the children about the event, but to continue to document their activity, record conversation etc. and meet again in a week
- Showed the parents the documentation – saw that children were enacting scenes of planes crashing into buildings and people dying, but always providing salvation – eg. An angel to wake up all the dead people
- Agreed that teachers would respond to the children if they initiated discussion
- The teachers saw themes arising in the children's conversation – that they spoke of the importance of peace and valuing diversity
- Quotations from the children were recorded on silk banners and hung from the theatre in the centre of town to give hope to the whole community

The image of the Italian child as an active member of the community is directly translated into contemporary Italian attitudes regarding early care and education. As one mother in Reggio Emilia noted, even the very young child, one as young as four months, has both the right and the need to get to know and be known by other members of the community beyond the nuclear family. The infant-toddler and pre-primary centres are considered ideal places for such relationships to begin to develop.

There are educators in this part of the world who are engaging in the difficult work of reflecting on the meaning of teaching and learning, of making their view of children as competent, full of potential and able to construct knowledge with others, visible in all aspects of their work – visible to

the children, to their parents, to the broader community. There is a pedagogy of listening – a pedagogy of relationships – a pedagogy that does not condescend to children, but rather invites serious respectful consideration of others and recognizes that there are a hundred languages, and a hundred hundred more. The piece of work I have here today was made by a child in Hamilton. He was not much of a talker. He had an interest in architecture. He arrived in our Together for Families program at Mohawk College with a book from the adult section of the library. He brought it over to the artist who is in the program, and flipped quickly through to find the page he was looking for – a photo of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in NYC. “That’s what I want to make”. They began to look for suitable materials. At the end of the morning, a shoe box, a coffee cup carrier, and two paper towel rolls had been secured together to provide a foundation. The project continued on and off for the next 12 months. It progressed from problem to problem, in fits and starts. How to make symmetrical arches – how to make pews – how to make the steeples taper – how to make them secure – how to make grey paint – how to make a stained glass window – how to have lights without the wires showing – how to make parishioners. He posed the problems, and was supported in generating possible solutions and soliciting help from others, sometimes learning new skills. From the very beginning, curiosity and learning refute that which is simple and isolated. Imagination and logic, as well as feelings, creativity, and aesthetics, have a hundred roots. Documentation of the process can be viewed on our Artists at the Centre website. You are welcome to see the finished product when the service ends this morning. Jason was 4 when he started this project, and 5 when he finished.

We have another wonderful example with us today of what can happen when we believe in children’s capabilities. Ilona Spleit has this unwavering belief. She knows that young people thrive with the support of someone who believes they are competent and capable, who believes that something is only worth doing well, and who will support them to do it well. The quality of musicianship you hear today is proof of the power of those beliefs.

Loris Malaguzzi said, “Niente senza gioia” - Nothing without joy. Perhaps above all, children have the capacity – and the right – to experience joy. And if we have the wisdom to recognize children’s capabilities and rights, we will have the good fortune of sharing that joy.