

Childhood and Citizenship: Making Children Visible in our Society

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Children have traditionally been considered citizens of tomorrow and are currently becoming more recognized as citizens of today (e.g., Rinaldi, 2006; MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007). Yet, what does the image of child-citizen mean in practice? We have been rethinking the image we hold of the child-citizen at Frog Hollow childcare services for over 12 years now. Frog Hollow Satellite Daycare is a Reggio-Inspired (e.g., Reggio Children 1996/2005) childcare program that offers programs from toddler childcare to school age care located in Vancouver, Canada. We question how citizenship might take shape through living, being, and doing in our childcare spaces. We wonder how opening childcare spaces to the public can view them as active and recognized sites of citizenships.

We began to rethink our image of the child-citizen by first unpacking the common meanings of citizenship. When we think of citizenship, what might come to mind is a person who holds a passport or has certain privileges granted to them by the Canadian government. These meanings are of course very important, and have real consequences in the lives of many people in Canada. However, we wondered what an expanded understanding of citizenship might mean for our work with children.

We draw aspirations from the important work by Carlina Rinaldi and others in Reggio Emilia, and re-interpret their work in our context at Frog Hollow. We have been rethinking citizenship as children's contributions. Rinaldi (2006) states,

The child is not a citizen of the future; he (sic) is a citizen from the very first moment of life and also the most important citizen because he represents and brings the 'possible'...a bearer, here and now of rights, of values, of culture...It is our historical responsibility not only to affirm this but to create cultural, social, political and educational contexts which are able to receive children and dialogue with their potential for constructing human rights (p. 171).

Our work at Frog Hollow, then, has involved not only valuing children's contributions here and now, but also an experiment into creating contexts and conditions for children's contributions in the childcare centre and outside. Next we will tell 6 stories as examples of how we have endeavored to create sites of citizenship for children to contribute. The first 4 stories are within our own programs, and the last two stories open up to the larger community.

Story 1: Children as today's citizens in school

In our Canadian culture, schools are traditionally places in which children learn to obey rules and routines instructed by adults. For us as educators to truly think of children as citizens who are bearers of culture and rights, we must provide opportunities in which children can be involved in constructing their own social and political contexts. School could be the first shared space in which these opportunities could be presented.

One day, the educators at Nootka School Age Program (ages 5 to 12) invited the children to share their perspectives about their rules at the centre and provide feedback as for whether they thought they were useful, meaningful and constructive for their community. As children participated patiently in this 40-minute meeting, it was evident that they enjoyed being heard and provided insightful ideas with such high logical foundations that would surprise most adults

not accustomed to listening to children as active citizens. That day, we learned as educators that sharing political and social responsibilities with children not only creates democratic environments, it also provides children with a sense of ownership that is much more valuable than any pre-instructed rule.

Story 2: Children and risk taking

To respect the child's rights to citizenship, the adults must be generous; they must be willing to share power and control; to let go and to welcome new ideas. There are many opportunities in the day (i.e., many ordinary moments) for us adults to practice this respect. We created one opportunity to practice this generosity, which required us to challenge our long held assumptions of children's capabilities and risk. One morning we placed a basket of the children's cars next to the slide, stood back and waited to see what might happen with this invitation. Normally, children might be told "No toys on the slide," or "Only one at a time." We tried to resist these all so common rules to see what might emerge.



Instead of worrying about children running wild or terrible physical accidents, what we noticed is that the children continued to experiment and connect with the slide differently. Many different objects were brought to the slide to see what might happen. The children carefully took off their shoes and went down the slide. Children went down the slide in various positions and constellations, testing out different ideas with their bodies. It was also not a perfect experience. It did also bring tensions and negotiations between educators, children, slide, and object. What emerged that day as important was being present, noticing, and respecting children's ways.

Story 3: Toddlers and climbing

Children are active constructors of culture and they communicate their wants for their environment and surroundings in ways that we adults may not always understand immediately. To recognize children as citizens with rights, we must recognize their different ways of communication. Rather than making assumptions about children's explorations and labeling them as problems, we must be open to the unknown and think about the reasons behind the actions. The Satellite Toddler's

educators came across this complex situation for a period of time and could only understand the true meaning of the children’s “odd” behavior when they let go of their pre-constructed assumptions and welcomed the toddler’s actions as their ways to contribute to the culture of the program.

For a few months, the educators at this program were struggling to prevent the toddlers from climbing furniture, walls and windows. It seemed that no matter what approach they took, the toddlers continued to climb high on everything and this was becoming a frustrating situation for the adults who thought of the behavior to be too dangerous and too interruptive. One day as the educators were discussing the situation, they decided to look at the toddler’s climbing from a different perspective. They asked themselves: “Why do the toddlers climb?”; “How do the toddlers see the world differently when they are standing on a higher surface?”; “What social-emotional skills are the toddlers practicing when climbing surfaces?”; “If we accept that this space is a shared space and the toddlers are part of constructing the culture within it, how do we interpret their actions?”

Discussing these inquiries the educators realized that the “problem” they were facing with the toddlers was in fact an opportunity for them to change their environment in ways the toddlers would appreciate more. For the next few weeks, educators intentionally created situations in which toddlers had to reach up, climb, dig in and work from different heights and angles to get things done. Intentionally climbing and reaching up became part of the culture of the program which further provided opportunities for toddlers to work collectively and to see things from different perspectives. This experience allowed the educators to reflect on the true meaning of citizenship: the opportunity to be heard and to be part of constructing the culture of our community.



Story 4: Making children visible through pedagogical narration

Children like adults are proud of the work they do. We believe they have the right to share their work with other children and adults; to receive and provide feedback; to study and reflect on their work process. We understand pedagogical narrations as the process of individually and collectively observing and recording, interpreting, sharing, and discussing artifacts (i.e., notes, images, drawings, maps, and so forth) (Government of British Columbia, 2008). Children's contributions should be a central element in this process so that it doesn't become only an adult intellectual activity. For educators to recognize children as active constructors of their own learning, educators must create spaces for children to be involved in interpreting and discussing artefacts. Below is an example with 3-5 children, where an educator is discussing their work with them.



The image to the right shows another example of such a space, where images and written notes are hung for toddlers. The toddlers point and shine their own light on the artefacts.



We are challenged by the toddlers to interpret their contributions with pointing and light, not only verbal feedback. The toddlers' actions and what they notice, adds more depth to our shared pedagogical processes.

As adults we bear the responsibility to support children's citizenship with sharing their work and engaging in meaningful interactions in their community.

Children as today's citizen in the community



How do we make others feel welcomed in our community?

How do different communities connect?

How do we respectfully add to other's work?

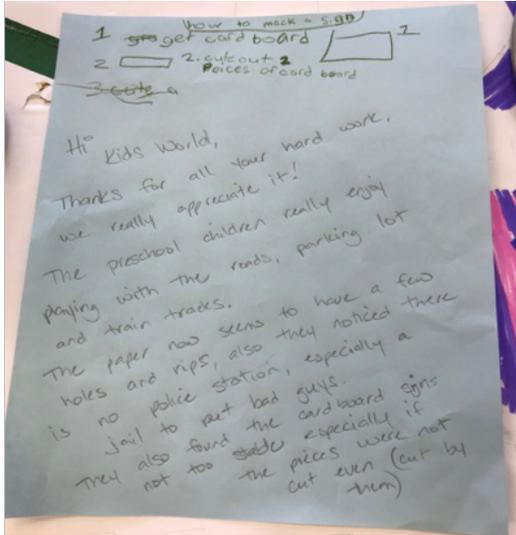
These questions were provoked when educators at Frog Hollow noticed children's yearning for community involvement. Toddlers wanted to go for neighbourhood walks; preschoolers were paying attention to how roads connect buildings and spaces; and school-age children were discussing the meaning of community and what it meant to be a part of a neighbourhood. These observations made us educators reflect on how our society views children and their place in the community. "How do children understand their community?" and "how do we connect our school community with other communities?"

The next two stories reflect our collective journey for understanding our own space and culture and reaching out to others'.

Story 5: Children and the city

It began one day with an educator's struggle of caring for materials and drawings in a shared space between preschool and school-age program. Sharing space with others that the preschool children have never seen before was new to them and came with struggles. Considering our recent inquiries about communities, we decided to take advantage of this "challenging" room and use it as a shared space in which two groups – unknown to each other – could come together and share life.

To begin the collaboration, the preschool educators proposed to the children to write a letter to the school-age children, without any expectation of where the project might go. We believe that creating contexts for children's contributions means that educators can still propose ideas and challenge children. It is not about only following the child.



The school-age children were pleased to be asked to contribute to the preschooler's inquiries and as the months went by, the children and educators of both groups used their shared space as a place of sharing ideas, challenging each other's thinking and proposing solutions to emerging problems.

The connection that was made between the two groups emerged into long-term friendships between the school-age children and the preschoolers, providing with the opportunity to experience what it means to be part of a community, a neighbourhood and a collective idea.

Story 6: Children and the neighbourhood

As educators at the Toddler's program noticed their interest in plants and gardening, they began to wonder how they could cultivate this connection and expand it beyond the school's walls. They knew that the toddlers enjoyed neighbourhood walks and noticed plants and talked about them on their trips.



The educators connected with the preschool children and invited them to join the toddlers in creating a garden in the community. The preschool children were excited to join the journey and started their work by drawing and sculpting the different kinds of flowers and plants they wanted to see in the garden.

As educators we recognized that children are active participants of their communities and we wanted to make this visible to them and to the neighbourhood. We connected with the Renfrew Senior's Care Centre and we offered to plant and maintain one of their gardens.

The project was the beginning of many community walks, discussions and connections as the toddlers and preschoolers got together once a week at the Care Centre and explored the many concepts of gardening with the presence of seniors, volunteer grandparents and the gardener.

Conclusion

Once we begin to shift and re-construct our definition of citizenship and democracy, it is more practical for us educators to create contexts in which children can practice their right as active participants of our society. The work may begin in our own space, where children are part of constructing the culture and the curriculum of the program. And can then be taken to the community, where children are involved in collaborative processes that directly or indirectly influence the members of that community.

References

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Biographies

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