UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Since its adoption by the United Nations in 1989, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has stood to signify international recognition of children’s human rights. All countries in the world – with the exception of the United States of America – have signed it. In the years that have passed, the children’s rights issue has travelled a long, and not always easy passage of interpretation in policy, practice and research. Australia is at a point in the journey where the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) mandates that educators will ‘reinforce in their daily practice the principles laid out’ in the UNCRC. It could be argued then, wherever children spend their everyday life – such as an early childhood centre – that context is therefore responsible in ensuring that the child is treated with dignity and respect as a human being with rights, given opportunities to learn about rights and, to practice them.

The UNCRC has three pillars of rights – sometimes called the three Ps: Children’s right to protection, provision and participation. Under the UNCRC, along with many other rights, children have the right to play, the right to rest and leisure, the right to an education and most importantly for this discussion, the right to actively participate in decisions about their lives. The UNCRC is very clear in this regard for children not to be expected to share a mature viewpoint, but rather given the opportunity to offer a viewpoint (Article 12), AND to have access to communication tools that best suit their requirements such as speaking, writing, drawing, photography and any other way of sharing their views and opinions (Article 13).
MALAGUZZI’S ‘IMAGE OF CHILD’

Loris Malaguzzi, the philosopher who brought the Reggio Emilia Educational Project to the world, held that all children should be recognised in terms of both their rights and their strengths. Malaguzzi proposed a strong and powerful image of child, one that honours children’s competence, curiosity, imagination, ambition, desires and their human rights. He believed that children have the right to educators who are truly present when they are with children, listening (we might say observing) deeply in order to give visibility to this new image of child through their documentation. In addition, Malaguzzi also believed that children have the right to use intelligent materials and resources as a key part in this approach to working with young children – including infants – and therefore demands that we create teaching and learning environments full of beauty, integrity, wonder and be a space for children’s rights to be enacted.

Malaguzzi recognised young children as citizens of the present, not just of the future. From the beginning of his work in Reggio Emilia in the 1960s, he invited the early childhood community (and others) to rethink how young children were viewed by society. He insisted upon adopting an image of child that was rich in potential – a child that was competent and intelligent and one who was an active not passive participant in their early childhood setting. Therefore, we have the possibility to develop an image of the child who is a thinker, who has views and opinions about the world around them, who has a right to intelligent and curious educators and, who is encountered with dignity, respect and awe as a learner.

‘Children need the FREEDOM to appreciate the infinite resources of their hands, their eyes and their ears, the resources of forms, materials, sounds and colours.’

Loris Malaguzzi

A FAIR AND JUST CURRICULUM

If we understand curriculum to mean all that occurs in an early childhood setting, from the time the centre/ school opens until the time its closes in the evening – we need to examine how we can uphold both the UNCRC and a strong image of child in all that we do, and not just at ‘core’ times of the day – developing a new mantra that says ‘Every day, Every child, Every educator, Every time’.

Starting the day:

Let us think about children’s right to a genuinely warm welcome in the morning – not just to their physical presence but also a warm welcome to their ideas and thinking. Children have the right to a learning context that waits in active anticipation of their arrival, one that will help them to connect with their previous ideas and offer them the possibility to work on new ideas and thinking.

Children have the right to be met by adults who have thought deeply about that previous work, and who know how to offer new and more complex materials, resources, questions and propositions. The time together in this learning community could begin with thoughtful discussions and conversations, with other children and the adults, about the possibilities and opportunities the day may bring.

The core of the day:

Many educators would support the idea of children’s right to choices, but these choices often come with parameters such as ‘it depends on how old the child is’ or ‘the regulations won’t allow us to offer that risky play.’ There are also the simplistic choices such as ‘what would you like to do today?’ that often mean the children get to choose from what the educators have already predetermined on table-tops or other areas. The core of the day is where children have the right to educators who are present – who focus on the process and not the product, and who see the child IN the process as an engaged and dynamic learner. They listen to children with their minds and their hearts along with their eyes and ears. They seek significance in children’s learning and are able to re-gift this listening back to the children for further consideration and work. They see the child who is intelligent, full of hope and wonder and most of all an active decision-maker in their own learning.
Meals:

Conjure the image of a fast food lunch experience and then imagine your favourite restaurant with family or friends. Unfortunately the practice for many children in early childhood settings it is much more the former than the latter. Children are often ‘collected’ to all eat at the same time - and this task can be all over by 11.30am – so that staff can begin to take their allocated lunch breaks. Lunch is often offered on a table that held the playdough 10 minutes ago, and no effort has been taken to transform the surface into a pleasant dining experience for the children (and adults). What are educators telling children about food/eating through these types of practices? Young children have the right to a favourite restaurant type of experience with a table prepared for eating adorned with flowers or an interesting object for discussion, a relaxed unhurried time with educators and friends, real plates, glasses and cutlery, and most of all enjoying the pleasure of eating their food.

Farewells:

Toward the end of the day, well really from 3pm on, packing up seems to be order of the day – right? But if we are to view the curriculum to be ALL parts of day perhaps a re-think is needed on how we uphold children’s right to access the curriculum right up until they go home. Unfortunately many children are herded in to one room so that the adults can go about the daily tasks of cleaning and tidying, while the children bide their time until their families arrive. Now, by introducing another mantra ‘Nothing without the child’ we can include children in the everyday – tidying up, sweeping and mopping or putting the washing on – but more importantly, thinking about the possibilities for tomorrow, preparing materials and resources with their teachers for these opportunities, and perhaps talking about the traces of learning that have been left from that day’s work. In other words, staying connected to their thinking.

If we are prepared to make these sometimes small, but sometimes big, changes to the way we work with children, there are many possibilities to invite children to engage with curriculum experiences that uphold their rights as citizens of the now, and to be positioned as competent and powerful learners.