

Reflections....

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A Child's Place School Roundtable 2020 – Really Seeing Children

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Last week NJEPPRE hosted the 3rd of this year's Roundtable Series at A Child's Place School, Lincroft NJ. This event brought together 40 educators from diverse contexts – infants, preschool, rural and urban, public and private – to think about the intellectual, emotional and even spiritual aspects of the work we do as teacher-researchers.



We began our morning by exploring A Child's Place School environment and then gathered in a large group. Our host site Director, Zachary Klausz, provided us with an overview of A Child's Place School intentions - including the idea of supporting nurturing and collaborative relationships among all members of the school community - It is in these relationships that we can find the courage to become thinking and feeling problem solvers. That idea of thinking vs. teaching came up repeatedly throughout the morning, most particularly in relationship to really noticing children's capacity to see and find endless possibilities.

To prepare for this Roundtable, we asked participants to read section 4 (Seeing Children and Theories of Development) in Deb Curtis's book, *Really Seeing Children*. The first part of the chapter provided us with a lens through which to understand the power of observation. Curtis (2017), speaks about using observation as a tool to notice a "*multitude of theories and research findings that you can use to make meaning of what you are seeing*" p. 104. We learned alongside one another as participants shared short stories of what happens when adults allow children to take ownership of their learning. We learned how the death of a class pet became the catalyst for sustained inquiry, for forming new hypotheses, and an opportunity to explore the idea of loss. Alba DiBella, founding member of NJEPPRE, shared a powerful story of a six-month child-led pipe project that taught us all about how we can turn to the children to learn more about how to solve problems and sustain play.

Later that morning we formed small groups and cracked open some questions for consideration. *Why is nature so important?* Understanding the tension between encouraging children's kinship

with nature and keeping them safe, occupied our thoughts as we shared ideas. *"In order to move beyond the barriers, fears, it is crucial that we find ways to cultivate our own deep connection to the natural world"* (Curtis, 2017, p. 110). How do we move beyond those barriers? We harkened back to our own childhoods and considered how we might re-ignite a child-like connection to nature. We listened to stories that reminded us the ease in which children connect with nature and outdoor experiences. We reflected on the importance of taking time to delight with children in the joy and excitement of the simple beauty of nature.



A conversation about humor and literacy sparked a lively discussion about relationship building. Children are literate from the moment they are born, eager to communicate their needs to their caregivers. Each reciprocal response helps to form the emotional bonds that are the essence of healthy brain development, and laughter strengthens those bonds. As children develop, humor becomes one of the strongest

ways for them to build camaraderie. Understanding that *"humor suggests growth in children's cognitive abilities and social understandings, we may be able to embrace the joy and solidarity it brings to them"* Curtis, (2017). Curtis also reveals the context of children's developing humor by weaving some typical toddler scenarios of children exploring the unexpected. Often these moments result from children acting on their own ideas, as was the case of the *"Babies in the Bath"* - As we reflected on the water play scenario of three children who decided to climb into the water tubs rather than simply bathe their babies - we could hear the uproarious laughter - we could feel the joy they had experienced together. We learned that humor is indeed a form of communication that is intrinsically connected to literacy. We learned that in order to continue to find meaning and purpose with our work with children, we need to pause and really see the children engaged in humorous moments. Understanding that children build camaraderie through *"breaking the rules"* - in those moments how do we challenge ourselves to see their perspectives - to support their innate desire to connect through humor and still maintain a comfortable balance for everyone? Finally, do we take time to see beyond the surface of things, and enjoy the playful aspects of life? *"We have a great resource in children when it comes to increasing the humor, laughter and joy in our lives, all it takes is slowing down to see, and appreciate children's humor"* (Curtis, 2017, p. 127).



Participants also considered the ways in which we might plan for unintended discoveries. Conversation expanded to include ideas about explore time invitations - and the value of giving children the time to be informed by the space as well as the materials. In order to fully consider unintended discoveries, first, it was important to consider the importance of planning environments in a way that are aesthetically pleasing. Curtis, (2017) referred to aesthetics as a *“focused and metaphorical way of knowing and experiencing the world that involves engaging with your senses, feelings, attitudes and processes and responses to objects and experiences”* (Curtis, 2017, p. 120). This carefully thought out idea, brought to light Piaget’s theory of physical development as being the stage in which children make sense of their world through physical interaction. Allowing the children to explore new space and materials, not only honors this natural maturation process, but often becomes the springboard for the unfolding of new ideas, new perspectives and social interactions.

Other dialogue centered around the complex topic of children’s relationship with food. We’re all vulnerable to reacting to the tensions surrounding food that may include the issues of quantity and quality relating to the growing concern of childhood obesity or cultural norms. An increase in childhood allergies, and the



disequilibrium that may occur in teachers when a toddler engages in sensory exploration with food, also contribute to external pressures. Consideration was given to “letting-go” of those tensions - It was agreed that studying children’s perspective as they gather around the table and receive their meals, might help teachers to fully immerse and delight in the children’s anticipation, enjoyment and satisfaction. In closing, the group reflected on Curtis’s (2017) final remarks of the section, *“Slowing down to notice the sweetness of a blueberry bursting in our mouth, the crunchiness of a cracker, the soothing comfort that comes from sipping tomato soup, and the joys and comfort and bonds that grow when sharing food with others, are gifts we can learn from seeing children’s pleasure with food”* (p. 131).

As the morning ended, we came back together to share reflections from our small group experience. Considering the *“Image of the Child”* as capable and strong was a common thread among all the groups. For children to realize endless new possibilities as they engage in play, we need to continue our journey of making meaning of children’s work, through quiet observation and reflection. We will continue to question how to reawaken our own connections to nature, sensory play, spontaneity and the playful things in life, as we look for ways to see beyond the surface of things. Finally, we hope to challenge ourselves in ways that help us to slow down, appreciate the joyful moments, and really see children as the ones who will impact what we do in our daily work.