

Sweden Presentation to the NSW parents 5/7/14

in attendance:

Lenny and Elaine Naftalin

Laura Hubber

Paige Greenspan

Barabara and Tami Polland

Andy Powell

Amanda O'keefe

Corey Lewin

Karen Gersten and her sister Kristin

Nicole Rotondo

Sean Maher

Doug Shemer

Cindy Nelsen, Roleen Heimann, Kristin Sherman presenting

Notes taken by Amanda O'keefe, Laura Hubber, and Kristin Sherman

Harold Gothson: "School should be a place where you can change your mind."

"You have to change your mind... It's not about what *I* think, it's not about what *We* think. To take the other Person's viewpoint, this is how we learn."

Roleen: The Swedish are looking at how they've been influenced by the Reggio Approach, but what does it look like here? It looks different from everyone because the struggle for us is we always want to learn something and apply it on Monday morning. We have to have a discourse that is uncomfortable. We can embrace our own identity while reaching outside of the Reggio influence for quality education while still inspired by Reggio Emilia.

Kristin: Our NSW identity is about relationship. Through this legacy we can bring the image of the competent child to the wider community for making change in the quality of children's education.

Cindy: The more you bring your own knowledge to your own community the more you can shape the way that children are viewed in society.

Roleen: As a school, as a collaborative (New School West, First Presbyterian, Branches Atelier, The Growing Place, Evergreen Community School) we want to bring more support to preschool and elementary school teachers outside of our collaborative and outside of the Reggio influence.

Kristin: We met Gunilla Dahlberg, author of a chapter in *The Hundred Languages of Children* and a book on documentation. She presented on the philosophical ideologies behind considering aesthetics in education: love, beauty, energy. She spoke about capturing the moments in between: about becoming, through learning. This offers "goosebumps" she said. She went on to explain that "When you are in proximity of learning, you are in a pre-personal stage of excitement that exhibits in goosebumps. If your cell has been affected by goosebumps you gave passion and power and that causes you to act. - to effect and be affected. Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio Approach often quoted Spinoza, an 18th century philosopher who promoted that this trigger is the moment before emotion. We don't know how a body will react or how a person will learn. We have to be sensitive to this, these goosebumps. In a time when we are experiencing more and more testing of children, we have to remain sensitive to these goosebumps. When we label children 'in need' or 'at risk' we diminish the richness of each child. We have to question the role of the teacher. Where we used to trust, now we test. It is important to look at quality of education, but how we look at it needs reassessment.

Kristin: The Swedish have a Pedagogical Institute that is connected to The Stockholm University and the Reggio Institutet. The NSW teachers marveled at the teacher training there. The teachers are given one year to train with a pedagoga and from there, they can drop in forever and learn more.

Cindy: 26 small schools feed into this Institute.

Kristin: Karin Hultman did her doctoral thesis on "Feminism and Gender in contemporary Swedish Preschool Pedagogy" She was a delightful and engaging speaker, in spite of that title. Karin Hultman is a professor at the Stockholm University. She is a poststructuralist feminist. She shared with us Sweden's history with gender studies. In the 1990s the Swedish preschools thought they did 'pretty well' with gender. They turned their lens on themselves, and found that, in fact, they treated girls and boys differently. Due to this discovery, they engaged in what they called **compensatory pedagogy**: making up for what is not given to boys or girls.

The premise of compensatory pedagogy was that each child only has access to 50% of the world as defined by their gender. To combat this, they divided the children into girl and boy groups and exposed them to areas and ideas that determined the 'opposite' gender. Karin reflected that this put the emphasis for change on the children. That this somehow would create a perfect person with a perfect childhood. This is impossible because there is no one answer for all of us. If we really value that we are each unique and a rare combination of masculinities and femininities rather than simply 'boys' or 'girls' narrowly defined by our cultures, then we have to put the emphasis of change on the teachers.

We as teachers have to deconstruct how we are setting up our environments, our expectations of children and even our language with each other and children.

Roleen: NSW has already caught ourselves in some language (addressing groups as 'you guys') and as our awareness grows, we are catching more and more moments we need to research to understand. We invite you into that research with us.

Kristin: We decided to have a research question over a two year period. We are in the beginning stages of observing ourselves through this lens and researching what we discover. We are monitoring our language, for example: The traditional mother's day poem the children worked on this week. After it was compiled, we wondered at the singling out of 'she' and 'mothers'. Are we contributing to the socially accepted 'norm' rather than seeing our community in all its diversity? Because, we KNOW that dads, gaymen, transgendered people, nannies, grandparents, aunts and uncles and many other members of families nurture and are loved by children for these nurturing qualities. But, our questions to the children were: What do you love about your mother? Instead of discussing mothering, nurturing and how that feels and who contributes to that. It gets pretty 'big' when you put your mind to it. It disrupts a lot of 'normal' thinking. And, I think that's the point - to **disrupt the heteronormativity** that dominates society. Heteronormativity-I thought the Swedes made that term up in a slip up in translation from Swedish to English. Turns out, no and that I've apparently bought into it up to this point. Heteronormativity is the dominant white, male, straight society we assume to be present at all times. I won't go into too much detail now but here is how it affects the children. We know our community of parents are pretty hip. We know most of this is coming from media influences beyond your control. It's in the advertising, on the billboards, in the coffee table magazines, it's everywhere. And so, children 'learn' to perform as a girl or boy in order to fit an image.

Performance, as promoted by Butler, is a perception of who we are, not truly who we are. For example, I do not grow my hair long and wear makeup because I am a girl, I grow my hair long and wear makeup so that I am perceived as a girl. And, boys have not escaped this pseudo identity either. To some extent we have mastered these performances and within mastery, there is submission. We have submitted to these performances. As adults, it would be incredibly hard to disconnect the performance from our actual identity, but with children, we have the opportunity to support their unique identity in these preschool years.

So, what is that research question we're going to pursue for 2 years? The collaborative is going to study together under the umbrella of identity formation. We at NSW are looking at gender formation as a part of identity. When we watch the children in the graduating class during free choice, we see a division of the sexes. We see very strong girls playing powerful roles through princesses that are ranked according to

their accessories. We see boys bristling with guns and one-upping each other with their powers of destruction. We ask ourselves if these are performances. If we were to focus our research on the strength of each individual identity, to document it, leave room to add to it, post it in the classroom and refer to it daily, would this affect how children exhibit power in their free time, or would the performance of 'girl' and 'boy' so supported in media and society remain the 'easy role'? The one we all master, and therefore submit to?

NSW research question (will be refined)

In a 2 year study, how will the promotion of an identity based on personality strengths and skills, uncategorized by gender, exhibit in free time, power play?

After the Sweden Presentation the parents and teachers had much to discuss:

Roleen: 3-5 the early years are all about roles.

They have to play stuff out to figure out who they are. We need to let them, but we are getting more conscious about how we direct them. And even asking a hard question which is 'are we directing them to places they don't want to be?'

If it overtakes their life then we look at that, if the child can't leave the character then they look at it.

Flat rules such as no media shirts don't work.

The hard part with media play is there is no exchange. The roles are static, they are set so it's hard to get creative or inclusive or even personal with them.

Kristin: If there was no 'Frozen' instead of the children going home and saying 'I didn't get to be Elsa' it would be 'I didn't get to be the mommy'. It's about gender specific power roles.

Roleen: We can consider also turning off our media. You have to say "have you noticed that we're not spending time together...?" Instead we get panic stricken and say "no tv."

In the past after coming back from Italy the Collaborative started Re-Discover inspired by The Remida Center in Italy. This provided open ended materials for schools. But it didn't last long because the teachers need to focus their time on their work. The Collaborative needed to hire someone to run the ReDiscover Center. Now the Collaborative is taking that experience into account as they look to creating a Pedagogical Institute and making it work.

As we support the Collaborative, we also want to start more parent education - are you interested in a book club?

In 2014, The Westside Collaborative is made up of these preschools:

Evergreen Community School

The Growing Place

Branches Atelier

The New School-West

First Presbyterian (they didn't go to Sweden)

References:

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