



## The Rights of Children through the Eyes of Children

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### Abstract

*The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in 2012 & 2016 recognised that one third of children in the Logan community were identified vulnerable in one, two or more of the developmental domains. In 2015 the Australian Government invested 10M in the 'Logan Together Project' a 10-year initiative to improve the quality of education, health and community support for children and families.*

*This strong focus in community ignited a Pedagogical research focus for the educators at Rosie's EL: Understanding how children enact their OWN Rights and the Rights of others. Leveraging from the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, Professor Carla Rinaldi's work in SA on 'Re-Imaging Childhood' and National Children's Commissioner's Children's Rights Report for Australian Children, our pedagogical research documented children's perceptions of how 'Rights', 'Relationships' and 'Citizenship' interconnects identifying powerful undertones and demonstrating the children's knowledge in the importance of respect, diversity and inclusively.*

*As the project built, the children's understanding of the impact they were having deepened their critical thinking. The 3yo children's exploration of the 'Rights of Other Citizens' was documented through storytelling and the development of books. This work inspired the children to create their own collaborative story about the rights of other children to have a family. The children's learnings and knowledge of the Aboriginal children of the "Stolen Generation" inspired them to develop a story, thinking critically about how these Aboriginal children would have felt. This story was shared with Aboriginal Elder and friend of Rosie's Uncle Barrie Watson.*

*The 4yo children were invited to be engaged in the Logan Together Child Engagement Project (2015) with Dr Barbara Piscitelli providing insightful feedback from the children's perceptions on living in Logan and their hopes and dreams for their community. (See attached to email)*

*In 2015 & 2016 the children's insights were shared at the Rosie's Exhibition of Work 'Making our Youngest Citizens Visible Citizens'. The work presented gave just over 700 community and family members, local politicians and members of Logan Together Project a clear perception of how competent our youngest citizens are in understanding, enacting and influencing their rights in a local community.*

*Key words: early childhood, children rights, curriculum, pedagogy*

In order to build a child's self-identity we must first understand how the child understands him or herself - in the environment and in their relationships. Educators are aware of the critical role the environment and relationships play in fostering children's developing awareness of their rights as contributing citizens. Whilst Educational documentation builds a strong 'Image of each child' it must be remembered that children are first and foremost a citizen in their own right. Krechevsky, Mardell and Romans (2014) state 'In Reggio Emilia, children are referred to as **protagonists**. The **Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2013)** defines a protagonist as "a leading actor, character or participant in a literary work or real event or a leader, proponent, or sup- porter of a cause.' [1] This is how the Educational team at Rosie's viewed children in our community but the challenge was: How could we give this lens to the community?

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The Rosie's way is a collaborative approach. For the team of Educators, delving deep into these meaningful connections and thus developing genuine partnerships with families and children was crucial. This was not only within individual groups but following on from 2015's inter-woven group engagements, connections were furthermore inter-connected. As children explored their own identity through their understandings of families, challenging their self-perception and exploring who were they 'under their skin' questions around their rights began to emerge from the documentation. *What do the children truly understand about 'their rights as an active and contributing citizen and where are they making influence?'* The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides people with a common ground to work together to build and strengthen their community and help shape the future and wellbeing of Australian children. The results in physical health and wellbeing and social competence was increasing. [2]

- The percentage of children vulnerable on the physical health and wellbeing domain has increased from 9.3 per cent in 2009 and 2012 to 9.7 per cent in 2015.
- The percentage of children vulnerable on the social competence domain has increased from 9.5 in 2009 to 9.9 per cent in 2015.

Advocating for children's competence is the underpinning of Rosie's Educators and as a service we are very proud of our achievements in the Logan area. In a local community where the AEDC (2012 & 2015) results identified one in three children in Logan to be in one-two vulnerable areas, shifting a community's perception of young children (competency/rights) can be a struggle. The commitment to advocating that all children can be contributing citizens regardless of the demographic of the community became our agenda. Children are citizens with inherent rights too. The United Nations Child Friendly Convention on the Rights of a Child - Article 12 [3] states:

***Children have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them and have their opinions taken into account***

Our intention was to find innovative ways for our Pedagogy of thinking, documenting and listening so we could ensure that the children of Rosie's Early learning would not only have a voice but it was a voice that was being heard and enacted on. Although the children had been actively voicing their thoughts for many years in the community through letters and contributions to local governments etc., it was apparent that the concept that these opinions should be taken seriously was not yet one of the community. The Logan Together Initiative [4] emerged in 2015 and is the first of its kind in Australia being funded by Federal, State and Local governments. Its premise is to address the AEDC (Australian Early Development Census results and to find better outcomes for children 0 – 8 years. We knew this was an opportunity that could not be under-estimated and we forged forward to give the children a voice. We found traction and by August 2015 the children from Rosie's EL were engaged in three projects capable of influencing perceptions.

## **What have been the Outcomes?**

**For children**, we understood that if they viewed themselves as contributors capable of making a difference this would be a lifelong strategy?. We hoped the overall outcome would be the long-term ripple effect on the children, parents, policy makers and community with a stigma of low achievers to see the potential to create new destinies.

Our Participation in the **Child Engagement Project** with Dr Barbara Piscitelli (AM) gave children this space:

Rosie's children were part of the 100 Logan children selected to share their ideas about life in Logan, and contributed those ideas as the children's voice to the Logan Together Roadmap [5]. *"Between August and October 2015, we conducted a comprehensive community consultation so that as many people as possible had a say in our Foundation Roadmap. We spoke with parents, carers, the community services industry, government departments, churches, sporting clubs, ethnic leaders, and many more. Most importantly, we asked Logan children what they think about living in Logan now, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.*

Key concepts presented themselves including family as an integral component of the community.



Holly (age 4) shared the importance of spending time together:

***I'm sitting on the sofa with Mum and Dad and Nana and Papa. My brother Max is asleep but me and Mum are still awake watching a movie and eating popcorn***



Harry's (age 4) thinking shared the importance of community places such as the National reserve:

***It's a forest it has lots of trees. The forest makes me happy***

**For educators**, it was an opportunity to think deeper and more critically about their own practice and that of their colleagues to create a space where challenging each other would lead to innovative pedagogy. This enhanced approach to our pedagogy would demonstrate value in children's '*interpretive theory*' as discussed by Carla Rinaldi [6] in *Re-Imagining Childhood*. Part of this thinking was to give the children 'visibility' in the community. Our connections with local Aboriginal Elder Uncle Barry Watson gave us this opportunity at the **Logan Together Community Forum Meeting**. Uncle Barry invited the children of Rosie's to share their Acknowledgement of Country and Aboriginal Yugambah National Anthem to officially open the Logan Together Community Forum. This was a great honor for children and educators alike. We valued this as an opportunity for the children to demonstrate their competence to an audience of 350 community members, politicians and policy makers. The standing ovation received not only gave us and the children great pride; we knew we had impacted on how these influential community members saw the ability of children in Logan and the strength of the connections these non-Aboriginal children were making to the culture and historical elements of Australia's First people.

**For families**, sharing the work in a different way would further instill confidence in the future to continue advocating for their child in any learning setting.

**'Rosie's Exhibition of Work'**. In September 2015 and again in July 2016 saw over 600 community members, local politicians, school teachers and family members attend the annual exhibition. Identifying the children's commitment to 'Being a Visible Citizen' projects over the two years have been shared.

### **Elements of self-reflection from 3 year olds:**



*At first I did this drawing and my brain said that it wasn't right and to try again so I scribbled it out then I did try again. And then it did this drawing. Child aged 3 years*



## Identifying who are we 'Under our Skin' – exploring emotions, empathy and understanding



Kindergarten children (aged 4) identified who they were 'Under her Skin'

"I am an artist. This is who I am" shared one of the children

## Ever-lasting importance of family



The youngest children aged 20 months connected strongly to 'Family' – recreating their over months and months of exploration

Our work is never finished, rather documented as the perfume of history – leaving a scent of culture. 2017 has taken inspiration from the AEDC results and in particular the increase over the past 6 years in the 'percentage of children vulnerable on the physical health and wellbeing'. This had lead educators research into 'Landscapes of Individual Intelligence'. The focus being on the lens of *Emotional Safety* incorporating and understanding: *Emotional safety in a new environment, emotional intelligence and resilience, self-management, social awareness and social skills (relationships with others)*. According to Denham, Zinsser and Bailey [7] Emotional Intelligence is about the connection we feel between body, mind and spirit – how we make sense of thoughts and feelings – that is the critical aspect of social and emotional learning). While social and emotional awareness continue to develop into adolescence, the greatest window of opportunity exists between birth to 8 years.

In conclusion we take inspiration from Professor Carla Rinaldi from the schools of Reggio Emilia and how she recalls how Loris Malaguzzi reflected on children's self-identity:

*'As Loris Malaguzzi wrote, it is the image of the child who, from the moment of birth, is so engaged in developing a relationship with the world, and intent on experiencing the world that he or she develops a complex system of abilities, learning strategies and ways of organizing relationships'*[8]

## **References**

- [1] Mara Krechevsky, Ben Mardell & Angela N. Romans (2014) "Engaging City Hall: Children as Citizens", The New Educator, Routledge Publishing, 2014, pg. 11
- [2] (<https://www.aedc.gov.au/communities>)
- [3] (<https://www.unicef.org.au/Upload/UNICEF/Media/Our%20work/childfriendlycrc.pdf>)
- [4] <http://logantgether.org.au>
- [5] <http://logantgether.org.au/targets-roadmap>
- [6] Rinaldi, C. "Re-Imagining Childhood – The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia", Government of South Australia, 2013

- [7] **Susanne A. Denham, Katherine Zinsser, and Craig S. Bailey, 2011**, “Emotional Intelligence in the First Five Years of Life” in Encyclopaedia of Early Childhood Development <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/>
- [8] Rinaldi, C. “Re-Imagining Childhood – The inspiration of Reggio Emilia education principles in South Australia”, Government of South Australia, 2013

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