“They tell you to speak up, but then tell you you’re too young”
(Toronto, Youth Participant)

As I reflected on the Shaking the Movers reports I was impressed with the ways in which the youth participants articulated their ideas, experiences, and recommendations for the Movers. I considered how the information shared by the youth connect to my observations and experiences working, teaching and conducting research in early childhood. Guiding my process was the question: How do identities converge to shape the experiences of discrimination for young children?

Given my background, it was not surprising that I immediately thought about the role that early childhood educators (ECEs) play in shaping children’s early care and education experiences. I thought about the relationships that are formed between the ECEs and children, how relationships are nurtured and supported between and amongst the children, the language ECEs use with children, the choices they make when organizing the classroom environment, how, if at all, children participate in their program in ways that go beyond participating in their daily activities, and how the curriculum supports children’s understanding of inclusion, gender, culture, age, and disability. Several themes related to shaping the experiences of discrimination for young children emerged from the reports but one theme that resonated for me is what I term as “Voice”.

VOICE

“Yeah, we have freedom of expression, but they don’t allow us to express”
(Toronto, Youth Participant)

The youth participating across the STM events remind us that their “voice is very
important” and that “everyone has a voice”. Youth are telling us to “never hush anyone’s
voice” (Toronto, youth participant). It’s a challenge however for young people to have a
voice if it isn’t supported and encouraged during the early years. A child’s right to
express their ideas, beliefs, and questions does not magically begin on their 18th
birthday, it begins at birth. This form of discrimination—stifling children’s voice—inhibits
children from embracing their multiple identities, whether it be their gender, culture,
religion, disability, and/or sexuality. How can young children even begin to have a voice
when they are constantly silenced by adults because they are viewed as not being
capable of sharing their thoughts on matters that are important to them, that because of
their limited life experiences they cannot possibly contribute to the conversation, or that
they may not have the language to express themselves; therefore, they are not capable
of formulating and expressing their ideas. In fact, we know from the STM youth
participants that they are in fact capable and contributing beings who are important
members of society.

I argue that ECEs tend to rely heavily on verbal communication – negating Article
13 – when in fact they should be providing multiple ways for children to express their
ideas. Moreover, they should actively listen to what children are sharing, whether it be
orally, in print, or through the choices they make (e.g., the way they choose to dress,
the activities they choose to do). An Ottawa youth participant shared that their super
power would be, “The power to listen. It’s important to listen to young people.” As
Movers, we must respect what the youth are telling us and ensure that the views of the child are given due weight.

ECEs’ beliefs, actions, and behaviours influence young children’s experiences and as a result shape the types of discrimination that our youngest citizens face every day. To illustrate, I want to share a young child’s experience with choosing what is commonly thought of as being a “girl” thing to do – wearing nail polish. At the time, the child was 3-years-old. He told his parent that he wanted to wear nail polish, so they painted his nails a beautiful pink colour; the colour he chose. The parent was quite sure that the next day the children in his preschool class would tell him that he couldn’t wear nail polish because he is a boy. However, it was the ECE’s reaction that she didn’t anticipate. Their son shared that his teacher told him that “boys don’t wear nail polish”. The parent was horrified and took the opportunity to educate the ECEs about the influence that discrimination has on young children and how discriminatory practices can shape their identity. She spoke with the centre supervisor and explained that punitive consequences for the ECE would not be helpful, but instead, that this incident be used to educate the team about the impact words and actions have on shaping children’s identity, both positively and negatively. The ECE did apologize to the child for saying that “boys don’t wear nail polish” and told him that “everyone can wear nail polish”. Whether she believed it or not is another issue, but she did demonstrate respect for this child by taking responsibility for her actions. The child is now in kindergarten and continues to wear nail polish and has formed his own response to anyone who makes a comment: “everyone can do anything they want if it doesn’t hurt someone”.

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. The role ECEs play in the lives of
young children affect their daily experiences and children’s voices, whether we agree with their ideas or not, must be acknowledged and respected if we expect them to have the confidence to express themselves as young adults. We cannot wait for youth to participate in a STM event for them to have their first encounter with children’s rights and to be in a safe space to find their voice. It would be a milestone in realizing Article 42 when one day STM events will be one of the many stupendous ways that children and youth can explore their rights as opposed to being the only way they have been introduced to rights.

With the supports and education in place, I am hopeful that ECEs can shift towards a “rights-integrative approach” (Di Santo & Kenneally, 2014) to early learning and care practice. A case in point is the documentation practice of the ECEs in our toddler and preschool lab school. After several discussions of children’s rights with the ECEs and most recently the use of photography in the classroom, the ECEs have shifted their approach to children’s documentation (i.e. weekly diaries and monthly stories). In the past, children would be involved in taking photographs within the classroom environment for their documentation. However, for the most part, it was the ECEs that would take responsibility for choosing and interpreting the photos for the children’s stories. Recently, they have moved towards a collaborative approach and children now choose which photos of themselves they would like to include in their stories. Children’s voices are now more visible in the narration. Giving children space to voice their thoughts and ideas, to pose questions, and to disrupt adult interpretations will create an environment where children can embrace their multiple identities and their right to non-discrimination can be realized.
In closing I would like to include examples of integrating a rights-integrative approach in existing early childhood curricula.

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<tr>
<th>UNCRC Article</th>
<th>In your curriculum look for ...</th>
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<td>Article 2</td>
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| The right to non-discrimination | • rights-holder language  
|                 | • how children’s rights are recognized  
|                 | • how diversity, equity, and inclusion are made explicit  
|                 | • how culture, family traditions, and home language are supported  | • How familiar am I with the UNCRC and its implication for practice?  
|                 |                                 | • How do my daily interactions demonstrate that children are valued and respected?  
|                 |                                 | • How do I make children’s rights explicit in my practice?  
|                 |                                 | • How do I engage with families in a meaningful way?  |
| Article 12     |                                 |                 |
| Respect for the views and feelings of the child in matters that affect them | • ways that children are encouraged to express their views  
|                 | • examples of how educators incorporate children’s opinions, ideas, and feelings into the day-to-day culture of the learning environment  
|                 | • instances that support developing listening skills for everyone in the classroom  
|                 | • opportunities for democratic decision-making without adult interactions  | • How do I listen seriously to what children are saying and feeling?  
|                 |                                 | • When do I ask children for input?  
|                 |                                 | • How can I include children more in decision-making, especially in matters that affect them?  
|                 |                                 | • What are the opportunities built into our day-to-day program that support children in practicing problem-solving and decision-making among themselves?  
|                 |                                 | • Do I provide children with a range of materials for expressing their ideas and feelings?  |

Adapted from: Di Santo & Kenneally, p. 405, 2014,

References