

Tuesday, January 31, 2012

Raising Citizens



Last year I wrote about [Customers, Learners, Citizens](#). I often write about children. In the broader culture, we are doing quite well in raising customers. In museums, schools, and homes, we work hard at raising learners. How do we raise citizens?

We talk about children and youth becoming global citizens and citizens of the world. Civic literacy is one of five 21st Century Themes in [Museums and Libraries, and 21st Century Skills](#). Schools and colleges, churches and synagogues set requirements for children and youth to complete community service requirements. Kindergarten and first grade study units typically include *getting to know the community* and *community helpers*.



In many children's museums, a city or streetscape with shops, bus, fire truck and streetlight are extensive settings. The expectation seems clear that young children should be learning about the community from play in settings with civic associations—dressing as a fire fighter, passing the town square on the way to the grocery store, delivering mail, or climbing aboard the bus. Although these settings facilitate valuable social negotiation, rich language, and drawing on previous experience, I am unaware of evidence that shows they are also helping to grow citizens. Perhaps when a group of children organize themselves around a sequence of putting out a fire and saving a cat in *Our Town*, they are engaged in a civic narrative of assistance and responsibility. I'm not sure that's adequate.

How do we grow citizens and what role can museums play?

The answer to this question is not, I repeat—not—an adult framed and delivered civics lesson, not even an innovative civics instruction about voting, the Constitution, or volunteering. It is not a screed against partisan sniping or voter apathy, nor is it an argument for giving children the vote. Raising citizens is about shifting our perspectives on children to...

- See them as citizens today

- Recognize their capabilities
- Strengthen relationships between the child and the community

Citizens Today

When we gravely refer to children as *future citizens*, our voices become thick and low; this is serious. Putting *future* between *children* and *citizens*, however, suggests otherwise by postponing a decade or two of opportunities for children to actually **be** citizens. If children are to be future citizens, why ignore early and middle childhood and the teens?

Carlina Rinaldi of the Municipal Infant Toddler Centers and Preschools of [Reggio Emilia](#) (Italy) frames the alternative: "*The child is not in the future, the future is his work. The child is now, he is a citizen since the day he is born and has rights.*" Children are citizens today. Now. This moment.

I suspect we don't think of children as citizens now because we focus on what they can't do by using as a measure what we think they will be able to do in the future. A three year old can't read yet and can't ride a two-wheeler. A seven-year old is not an abstract thinker and doesn't think using multiple variables. In this deficit-based view, a three-year old simply turns into an inadequate five-year old rather than a competent, accomplished three-year old who will become an equally capable five-year old in just two years. In this respect, I believe, we are not taking children seriously at all.

Capable Children

In a view of children as citizens now, however, their capabilities and strengths become the focus. This includes the presence of empathy and appreciation in toddlers. Last year, four colleagues in a Twin Cities school district gave themselves the task of focusing on helping behaviors and acts of kindness among toddlers and preschoolers in their classrooms. This was a shift from a perceived focus on problem and negative behaviors. Their focused observations noticed, for instance, a child desiring a particularly beautiful bead that another child had and receiving a promise of one similarly beautiful bead being found for her or being given *that* one. A classmate spent time finding another beautiful bead. After regularly noticing unprompted acts of kindness among young children during play, this group now sees these behaviors as the norm in the classroom. Acts of kindness and generosity, they have decided, are generative. This project, described more fully in [Tomsensori's](#) blog, includes videos that capture moments of kindness and appreciation.

Children's capacity to be citizens is widespread and not rare. Citizen-relevant capacities unfold continuously throughout early and middle childhood and beyond. Around eight years, children respond to stories concerning fairness and justice; they are interested in topics related to interdependence. Soon after, their ability to deal with multiple variables emerges. Around eleven years, children's capacity to de-center and see the world from various perspectives increases; they are able and willing to see both sides of an argument.

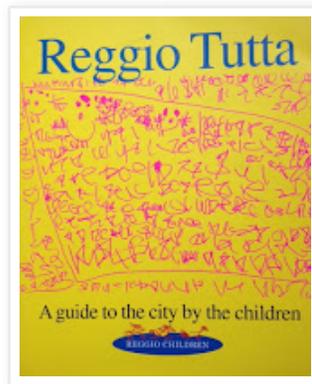


Such developmental changes are occurring in children who are born researchers, discovering and navigating this moment and the next. Nourished by a joy of questioning, children are growing a sense of

possibility and efficacy; they are intent on fully knowing and inhabiting their world. A child who searches everyday for the reasons for things, who searches to understand something, and who draws out meaning is constructing his world, a world that is rapidly changing and, day by day, becoming the future.

Seeing and Being Seen By the City

Children have considerable capacity to be citizens now and in the future. Opportunities and experiences, however, can't be limited to recreated cities or fenced in playgrounds where children play among themselves and peek through a fence at a larger world. To flourish, children need real encounters in the places they live, play, and go to school; in their neighborhood, town, or city; and with family, friends, and new faces. Meaningful ways for them to make sense of their civic world come from opportunities and experiences to participate that are grounded in a spectrum of the community's vitality, complexities, and realities.



The community serves as a [fund of knowledge](#), providing resources and revealing relationships embedded in community, neighborhood, and home. As children experience the city directly, the abstract concept of community dissolves. When children move around and through the city, when they walk, take busses, ride bikes, and travel by car, they come to know the city. When they photograph the river, follow the railroad tracks, or [study their city](#), the parts, people, and relationships that make up the community become visible. The possible ways of taking care of one another and of valued places come into focus. Real life, in-community experiences activate and strengthen connections and a sense of belonging essential to helping children find their way and their place.

When children meet an expert potter, write with a local poet, visit the waterworks department, interview a community gardener, or gather data in [a ladybug count](#) with scientists, they engage in meaningful opportunities to think, learn, decide, and lead. As children actively engage in and with their community, they become visible and remembered by the community. Just as children need to see the city, the city needs to see, remember, and value their children.

The Habits of a Community

Children grow into our expectations of them. They follow our examples of being civil or uncivil in voice, tone, gesture, and action. They watch as parents, neighbors, and grandparents actively participate in their community, vote, reach out to others, listen to voices they disagree with, take them seriously—or not.

The habits of a community develop the habits of children. In serving their communities and as parts of their communities, museums have roles to play in developing those habits and raising citizens. Museums can recognize children as citizens *now*, see and build on their strengths and competencies, and engage them in real experiences.

In museums we can notice acts of kindness and helping behaviors among children. We can draw on their questions and understandings of their streets, bridges, sewers, buildings, and parks. We can invite them to explore the real workings of the city and open the museum to their ideas and discoveries. We can pair them with artists, tinkerers, chefs, inventors, and writers. We can involve them in community-based projects of today, for tomorrow. In an effort to raise citizens, we can grow the ways in which we see children as citizens and expand the roles museums play (and play well) to help raise citizens.