Director’s Corner: Cooperative Games

After embracing our own passions and enrolling in the inspired causes of others, we can purposefully orchestrate significant transformations, as exemplified in The Art of Possibility. Zander and Zander advocate “Being the Board”, by which they mean renaming yourself “as the board on which the whole game is being played” (p. 141). In this practice, we quit playing the Blame Game, in which we focus on “shoulds” and “oughts” because we really cannot do anything about others’ choices, and we choose to focus less on gaining control and more on making a difference that will improve our experience of the situation.

At the Children’s School, our most dramatic example of this practice came after our school flooded in 2009 and then again in 2011. In both cases, we could have chosen to play a game of panic or pity, to be demanding or downtrodden, but we chose instead to play a more collaborative game of optimism and opportunity. In both cases, our approach led to positive relationships with the many professionals who assisted with our restoration and to productive renovations by combining our insurance funding with some capital reserves. If adults model such strategies for improving our experience of the situations we face, while also helping children to practice similar strategies in small ways, they can build strong skills for facing future challenges. For example, when distributing carpet squares, we have a saying that, “You get what you get, and you don’t get upset.” Being the board in this context might involve choosing not to whine about not getting your favorite purple carpet square and instead choosing to pretend that the green one you got is a lovely magic carpet.

A real life example written for children is “Wangari’s Trees of Peace”, by Jeanette Winter, a true story of Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmentalist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Wangari faces the challenge of deforestation of her homeland and repeated opposition from the male-dominated government and business sector by changing the game and planting saplings herself while teaching other women to do the same. Her vision, determination, and creative incentives yielded widespread commitment to replenishing the trees and sustainably managing Kenya’s natural resources.

Zander and Zander’s next practice involves articulating a common vision of harmony, peace, and plenty. Leadership in “Creating Frameworks for Possibility” involves boldness like that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who shared his “dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed …” or the teacher who shaved her head in order to help the healthy children in her group better connect with the classmate having chemotherapy. “Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse” by Leo Lionni is a children’s story about envisioning new possibilities. Alexander, a real mouse who is tired of being chased and avoiding mousetraps, wishes to be a wind-up mouse like Willy, who everyone seems to love. The two become friends while Alexander pursues a magical means of becoming like Willy. When he learns that Willy is about to become trash with other old toys, Alexander considers a new, self-sacrificing option for the friendship to continue. Creating frameworks for possibility is about designing new games for living, where playing becomes more important than winning and everyone can participate fully. During the recent Bird Bonanza, families had the opportunity to experience some cooperative games designed to help children focus more on strategic play than individual success. We can all benefit from similar practices as we partner to enhance our teaching and parenting, particularly in contexts that involve circumstances beyond our collective control.