Director’s Corner: Advances for All

The final practice advocated by Zander and Zander in The Art of Possibility is “Telling the WE Story”. Instead of focusing on Us vs. Them, we envision a transformative possibility of connection and communication. “By telling the WE story, an individual becomes a conduit for the new inclusive entity, wearing its eyes and ears, feeling its heart, thinking its thoughts, inquiring into what is best for US” (p. 183). Notice that this story is not about compromise between opposing desires, but rather about being open to integrating a broader set of desires such that together we can “wish inclusively.”

Even in well-functioning marriages, families, laboratory schools, and universities, our differences in values and perspectives yield many opportunities for conflict that can lead to negative interactions that then spiral relationships downward. Parents vs. children, educators vs. administrators, faculty vs. staff vs. students, educators vs. researchers, men vs. women, veterans vs. newcomers, and so it goes. At the Children’s School, we begin to tell the WE story by the language that we use. We call the children “friends” to avoid the divisive labeling by gender than pervades most schools (e.g., “Listen, boys and girls …”). While we do have a hierarchical staff structure to clarify the chain of responsibility, we most frequently function as “teams” (e.g., the 3’s team, the administrative team, etc.). In all of our interactions, we seek to find a way for everyone to contribute to our collaborative endeavor positively and productively. In Zander and Zander’s words, the goal is to invent stories “that will take us from an entrenched posture of hostility to one of enthusiasm and deep regard” (p. 182).

One story that clearly demonstrates both the potential for and value of taking the opportunity to contribute to a more harmonious community is “The Ant and the Elephant” by Bill Peet. Each character, beginning with a tiny ant, encounters problems in the course of the day, but none are willing to help each other until the friendly elephant enters the scene. There’s no reward for the elephant beyond a simple thank you from the ant, and there is much badgering and ungratefulness along the way. Nonetheless, the elephant chooses to pleasantly help each animal. His problem comes when he begins to brag that he is always the helper and will never need others to help him. The WE story begins to emerge when the elephant needs rescuing and the grateful ant recruits an entire community of ants to strive beyond what any of them thought possible. The book’s publicity material summarizes the story as, “many creatures are helped when two animals refuse to conform to the rules of the jungle.”

As graduation approaches at CMU and at the Children’s School, many people in our community are planning transitions to new schools, jobs, etc. For them, the need to build innovative connections and collaborations is obvious and potentially energizing. For the Children’s School staff and the returning children, families, undergraduates, and researchers, the path forward is less clear. We have met and/or exceeded the NAEYC accreditation standards, we have achieved our Pennsylvania Private Academic School licensing, our budget is balanced, etc. As I see it, the challenge we face is to proactively engage our passions to consider new possibilities so that we continue to advance in ways that will create a more desirable learning context for everyone involved. “What do WE want to happen? What’s best for US? What’s OUR next step? (p. 184)”. We hope you will engage in the dialogue, share your spark, and be a contribution as together we envision new possibilities.