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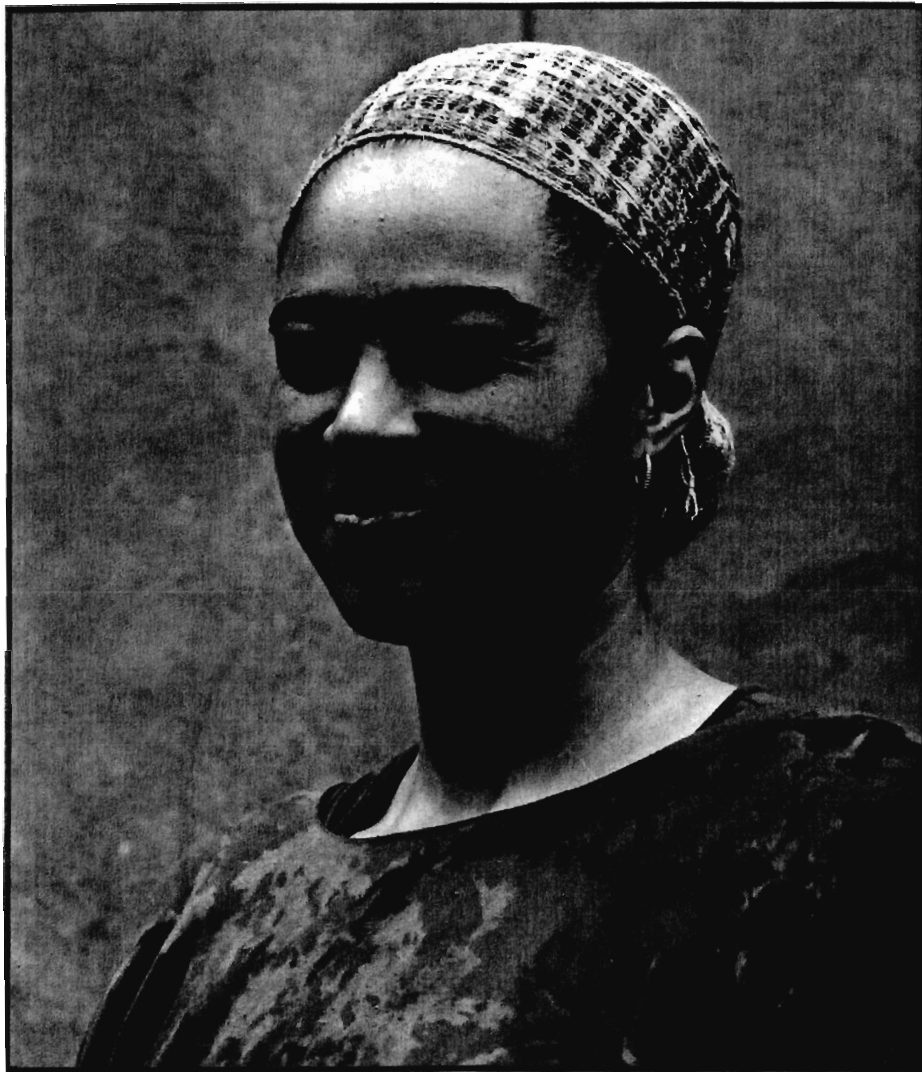


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Reflections on Choice, Empowerment, and Democracy



INSIDE:

Multiple perspectives on the philosophies and practices of learning alternatives



The Power of Choice

BY CARLO RICCI

Last summer my five-year-old daughter decided that she wanted to play soccer. A few of her very close friends were signing up and so she asked us to sign her up as well: Thus started my initiation into the world of little league soccer. Sure, my daughter was thrilled at getting her new soccer shoes and outfit, but the excitement ended there. For her the beautiful game was not such a beautiful game after all. Watching and learning from her by listening about her phenomenological experience with soccer defamiliarized and enhanced my understanding of the game of soccer. My five-year-old helped me to re-see soccer from her eyes.

So, how did she see soccer? For Annabel, being on the soccer pitch was not a comfortable place. For her, soccer was a violent and aggressive sport. Annabel is a very loving and empathetic person and soccer did not fit into her paradigm. She embodied the soccer experience as a competitive war where all the children were expected to fight and push and do whatever they had to in order to get at the ball and kick it into the other team's net. All the while, adults were on the sidelines yelling and urging the aggression on and cheering when their favored team scored. In addition, the adults were cheering the goal while the team that was scored on was feeling sad about having let the other fans down and so this made the cheering all the more mean from Annabel's being.

My point is not to argue that soccer is a mean, violent and aggressive sport and that everyone should stop playing it, my point is simply to share a little girl's phenomenological experience with soccer and to make a larger ethical point around the power of choice. I want to make clear that the parents and the other players may not have been intentionally acting aggressively, but what matters is that this is how they were interpreted as acting and I had come to understand them as I was initiated into the thinking of a five-year-old girl.

Now, for me what follows is the most important part of this piece. Annabel clearly did not want to be there. By now, we had spent quite a bit of money that was nonrefundable and she had made a commitment to the team. This was not even an issue for me; ultimately, the choice of whether to continue or not was not up to me or anybody else other than Annabel. If she did not want to play soccer anymore for whatever reason she did not have to and we supported any decision she wanted to make. Unfortunately, many people did not and do not see it this way and when I started to share the story formally or informally I was challenged as people tried to convince me on how wrong I was in not forcing her to continue to play. They asked me if I had not realized that by allowing her to quit that I was teaching her to be irresponsible. I was teaching her that commitment and responsibility to others does not matter.

What I should have done, I was told, is to force her to go and teach her that once she commits to something she has to see it through and that if after the season she felt that she did not want to play soccer again that would be fine but that she should not be allowed to quit mid-season and especially not after so few games. Annabel was not the only young person who was feeling this way and some of the other parents shared with me how their daughters also did not want to go, but that once they got there they would have a great time and so the crying and protests that happened before the games is just what children do.

Having thought about this a lot over the last few months and having had conversations in groups or one on one with

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many people about this, I am more convinced than ever that giving children the power of choice is the ethically correct thing to do. During one exchange a woman suggested we transfer the scenario to a drama production rather than a soccer pitch and she thought that would make me see the error of my ways. She framed it in the following way: What if Annabel was a lead actor in a play and decided to just get up and quit, then what? What would happen to the production? Would this be fair to the others? It then occurred to me that there are situations where this has happened. It is not unheard of that a lead in a play had to excuse herself from the production either temporarily or permanently. What happens in those cases? Someone else takes over and the show goes on.

But more importantly, consider this, I asked: What if Annabel had broken her leg and could not continue for that reason, then what? Then she has a legitimate excuse and could and should be excused, was the consensus. Are we suggesting then that a broken leg is more serious than a broken spirit? Holistically speaking, we are made up of at least mind, body

and spirit and so if her spirit is being threatened should she not be allowed to act according to her own wishes?

From my perspective then, what did Annabel learn? She learned that she has a voice, that what she thinks matters and that she has the power to control her own life. She learned that her resistance to competitive sports and activities is not abnormal and that there are others who are willing to support her views around the importance of cooperation and what she perceived to be a negative aggressive place. She learned that she is a human being with agency and she can exercise it when she feels she needs. She also learned that she can trust me to support her and many other things that I cannot yet imagine.

CONCLUSION

Children are very capable of having profound and deep philosophical discussions and I believe that it is important that we give them the space and place where these conversations can take place. I share with my children about how other children do not have the same opportunities to exercise their agency as they do and that they should understand that. It is not enough that they live in freedom but I believe they need to understand what that means and they clearly can.

What I have noticed is that with freedom responsibility does follow. Freedom and responsibility are not separate

things but part of the same construct. Unfortunately, through language games this connection gets divided and the consequences are evident in the atrocities that get reported in the papers daily. My hope in writing this is that the dialogue around young people and the power of choice will continue to grow and that young people will be trusted. I invite all of you now to trust, respect and empower the young people that cross your path and to encourage others to do the same: May this notion spread and multiply.

Carlo Ricci currently teaches in the faculty of education's graduate program at Nipissing University and he founded and edits the online *Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning* (JUAL). He tries to incorporate the spirit of unschooling, democratic and learner centered principles in all of his classes. Everything of value that he has learned, he has learned outside of formal schooling. He has never taken a course in school connected to what he now teaches and writes about. He has taught in elementary and high school. He has also taught in undergraduate, teacher education programs and graduate programs. He continues to heal from the wounds inflicted on him by formal schooling. He has two daughters ages 4 and 6 that he hopes will decide to unschool. ●

Contemporary Home Schooling

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Andrea O'Reilly notes that "only an empowered mother can empower children, and children can only be empowered by an empowered mother." Empowered mothering requires that mothers have their own social involvements and have time to develop their self. In doing so, they will be able to provide their children with the knowledge and resources to do the same. It is a form of mothering that strives to teach children to acknowledge and think beyond gender-role stereotypes, to develop critical thinking, and to support holistic living. Empowered mothering is a discourse and a way of life that challenges repressive structures and is making way for a contemporary way of living and learning.

Pat, a home schooling mother of two children under twelve years old, considers herself a feminist. Although her husband is the primary income earner for their family, Pat practices empowered mothering by the ways she structures her children's learning and by continuing to engage herself in activities that she values and enjoys (Pat practices herbalism, works in community gardens, and works with Native American communities). Mel, quoted earlier, notes that she explicitly teaches her children about gender stereotypes and encourages them to create their own path. She says, "I do make a point of telling the kids that I have a job other than being their mom and educator (I am a freelance writer), because I want them to see that women do more and can do more, and I think that concrete examples are good. I also

want them to feel supported in doing whatever they want in their lives, professional or not."

Contemporary home schoolers tend toward certain general qualities within their practice and philosophy. They came to practice home schooling because they questioned the intentions behind education institutions and believed that they could connect to a more liberated method of learning. Within their home schooling practice, they embrace a holistic approach toward living, which has a sense of eco-awareness and values both individual and community development, and they tend to practice empowered mothering, recognizing the need to strive toward egalitarian social structures and to make time for themselves. Connie, one mother from the West Seattle Home School Group simply stated that within home schooling, "the key is growing yourself."

Gea D'Marea Bassett lives in Seattle with her partner, Doug and their homeschooling son, Zizi. She was unschooled from birth until college and has an MA in Education from Goddard College. Aside from writing, traveling, cooking, and wearing flip-flops, her current projects include staying engaged with her local home school community, establishing a haven of exotic edible plants in her backyard, and enjoying time with her family. She can be reached at geabassett@yahoo.com. ●