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# Listening to Our Youngest Citizens: Children's Voices in Community Planning

The pedagogy of listening asks us to hear children's voices and take their ideas seriously. Natalie Lucas shows us what is possible when that listening extends beyond the walls of our early learning centres into city planning meetings and community development. It began with a simple conversation on a warm summer morning.

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Natalie Lucas

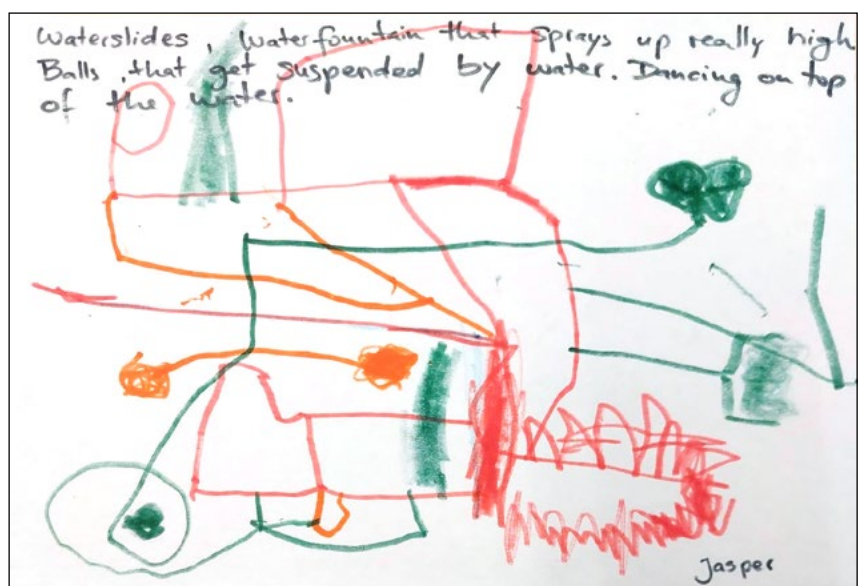
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**T**he weather was warming up fast and more sun-shiny days were happening. On this morning, while dropping her son off at Valhalla Children's Centre, I heard one of the moms tell her son, "Don't forget, we are going to have a picnic at the beach today." After she left, I commented to the boy, "Wow! That sounds wonderful! Slokan beach! Are you going for a swim, too?" "No," he said with very little enthusiasm. I asked "Is the water still too cold?" "No, we're not allowed," he replied. "Really, why?" I asked. "We can't go in the water until we put on a life jacket and a grown up goes in the water with us. My mom says, "Stay on the beach where I can see you."

Other children were listening and one child said, "I don't have to wear a life jacket at a water park." Another added, "We should have a water park at the beach!" Then, other children agreed, "Yeah, we don't need to wear life jackets at a water park, and we don't need our parents to come with us! Yeah, we need a water park at the beach!" Another very wise child added, "And we can bring water from the lake!" Wow, I thought to myself, recycling water from the lake! How amazing is that?

By this time they were very excited. "We gotta tell our moms and dads!" "Yes, we do!" I said, "and who else can we tell?" "The beach people!" they responded. "The people that take care of the beach?" I asked. "I think the mayor knows them." So, we walked to the Village office to speak to the mayor. Although she wasn't available, the children shared their idea with those working in the office who told the children that they would tell the mayor. They also suggested that the children draw their ideas about things they actually want to see in the water park.

And, that is what they did; they drew water parks! I could see, though, that some children were not as familiar with what a water park was, so we began to research water parks all over the world: we looked at pictures, talked about what they saw, and how they felt about what they saw. Then we planned a field trip to Castlegar's water park to experience an actual water park. Again, we talked about what they saw, experienced, liked, and what they wanted in their water park at the beach.



*The children drew their ideas of what they wanted a water park at Slokan beach to look like.*

About this time, the city of Slokan was beginning to think about developing the waterfront where Slokan Forest Products previously had a sawmill (<https://waterfrontcommons.ca>). They sent out a survey to all residents of Slokan, but not to Valhalla Children's Center. When we found out about the survey, I realized that this was an opportunity to share the children's perspective. We put together a file that included the children's own perspectives, their ideas and their drawings. They knew that they were sharing with "the bosses of Slokan." We took all of this to the Village Office.

Their ideas were presented at a public information gathering along with many other ideas from people and organizations in the area. Then, all these ideas including the children's water park idea were put together into a [What We Heard Report](#). Wow! What amazing news! The people of Slokan heard the children and the employees at the Village Office thanked the children for their ideas. Their voices were heard; their input was valued.

When children trust you, they can talk to you about anything. They can talk to you about their experiences, their joys, their worries and their plans. How do we earn that trust? I believe it is by listening. Not to listen to give them an adult answer; we need to join them, hear their words, see the world as they do and be confident that they can figure out a solution, a plan that works for them.

Loris Malaguzzi reminds us that, "Ensuring that every child feels a sense of security and belonging within the school enables each child to accept and participate actively in transforming situations that are part



*We researched water parks from all over the world and made a field trip to Castlegar's water park so the children could experience a water park.*

of learning experiences." But, too often, people only view young children as "cute" who need to be taught things that adults know better and think are good for them.

However, we as early childhood educators are in a privileged position to observe, listen, support, and experience the amazingness of our youngest citizens. Who would have thought that a water park would be a good idea at the Slokan beach? Yet, the logical thinking of our children has pointed out what adults' perspectives have not seen. Carla Rinaldi writes that listening is "welcoming and open to differences, recognizing the value of another's point of view and interpretation." (Rinaldi, 2001).

While the story of the Slokan beach waterpark slide is still in progress, I am confident that in the future, thanks to the children of Valhalla Children's Center, the Slokan beach area will become a family environment that's inclusive and safe for

all. I hope this story serves as a reminder that listening is not only a pedagogical strategy but also a way of thinking and looking at others, including our children—our youngest citizens.

## References

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- Rinaldi, C. (2001). The Pedagogy of Listening. Project Zero and Reggio Children: Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners. *Reggio Children*. <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/pedagogicalexplorations/wp-content/uploads/sites/4432/2019/09/The-Pedagogy-of-Listening-.pdf>

*Natalie Lucas has recently retired after 38 years in the two centres she established in Slokan, BC. She continues to honour her ECE philosophy in community with story telling sessions, mentoring ECEs and sharing her knowledge and advocating for the profession with ECE students.*