

The Convention on the Rights of the Child Thirty Years Later

What Happened???

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When Kathy Vandergrift, Chair of the CCRC, contacted me to contribute to the CRC 30 years later series of articles for the 30th anniversary, it stopped me short. Five years into my retirement, I realized I had not given the CRC much thought over that time – though when I was working in the field, it was part of my daily lexicon. In policy, research and practice, I believed in and saw the value of a unifying world document that nations could commit to on behalf of children – really, on behalf of the future of the world. And yet, for five years it has essentially been invisible in my life. I have two grandchildren, grandnieces and nephews – yet discussions framed around a rights-based approach with children have been absent in my discussions with family and friends. What happened to the CRC? Having been so immersed for so many years, how could it seem so invisible to me now?? I began to call around to friends and colleagues and to review my own history with the CRC; and what I have come to is this:

At first, I felt disappointed. So many of us worked so hard for so long to raise awareness about implementation of the CRC throughout the various children's systems in which we worked. I asked colleagues currently working in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) field how the CRC may have been incorporated into the professional education and practice of today's practitioners – did they see evidence of this? Were there advocacy papers referencing Canada as a signatory and advocating for the basic rights of children, INCLUDING the right to benefit from child care services? Were students coming into the field getting a good introduction to the CRC both in their upcoming roles as advocates and as teachers of the young? Were they understanding not only the advocacy role but also the role they played in modeling the CRC in areas like a child's right to voice in matters pertaining to them? Were they referencing Article 3 to keep the focus on the "best interest of the child" with any policies, procedures, practices to protect and care for children? My disappointment was that it did not seem to be as "commonplace" as I thought it might be after 30 years.

However, as I continued to discuss this with a variety of people and went back in my mind's eye to all the various ways I had participated with so many others to breathe life into the CRC once Canada signed, two things came clearly to mind: foundations must be built for long-term endurance and change is slow.

When I thought of all the work that had been done, starting 30 years ago, I realized that the 30 years has really been foundation building. It has been many, many people across Canada who have written the position papers, incorporated the CRC into children and youth policy and practice across provincial, territorial and federal government, used the arguments in courts, developed training materials across a legion of professions that work with and/or impact on the lives of children and youth. When I visit the offices of the B.C Representative of Children and Youth, and a number of offices of the B.C. Ministry of Children and Family Development, I see a

“child-friendly” poster on the CRC we developed probably 20 years ago. And I remember at the time, the Queen Alexandra Foundation, which usually only funds local projects, was one of the funders for this national project as they believed in the importance of it – and the commitment they showed at the time is still there for people to see every time they walk into one of those offices. I know there is legislation and provincial and federal policies where committed public servants have woven in the language and intent of the CRC into public service areas from early childhood care and education, public education, child welfare services, family law and practice, medicine...the list can go on. And in fact, that is what is exciting. The list can go on – and will. Because all this work has been building the foundation.

David Allan Coe said: “It is not the beauty of a building you should look at; it’s the construction of the foundation that will stand the test of time.” I had been looking around for the beautiful building instead of looking at the increasingly strong foundation that has been and is being built. When you are building a house, you: pick the site, survey it, start digging, install the footings, make sure everything is plumb and then seal the footings. Canada – and the world really, has been our site. We have had a good look all around the site. We know there are many roadblocks on this site that work against what we are trying to build, AND we continue to build in ways that mitigate the forces that will work against what we are trying to build. We make sure we build in those things that can withstand any of those negative forces, storms and vandalism that can topple all the good work.

Much work has been done in these past 30 years. A strong foundation has been built. Many of the other articles in this piece will highlight the phenomenal work that has been done and is being done. What is being built is meant to last many, many lifetimes for many, many children. Of course, the work will be/has been slow – AND the work is good. The work will change the world.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead.

To all of you who have worked so hard these last 30 years, to all of you who will work so hard these next 30 years – it is this work that will change the world for all of our children and the many generations to come – seven generations and more.