



Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

It began with “Sawubona” (“I see you”) the SiSwati greeting Irma Allen taught us when we arrived in Swaziland. Little did we know that this message would become the theme of our African journey.

As we visited schools and talked with teachers and administrators, as we immersed ourselves in environments filled with children, we began to find our stride as we worked to really see each person we encountered. We came to believe that the best thing we could do in each situation was just to take it in — visually and emotionally.

We walked onto the playground and children swarmed us. Each one wanted to touch and be touched, to be seen. Roger took out his camera and began snapping close-ups. They mobbed him — eagerly smiling, reaching, waving to get his attention. And every one in turn captured that attention as Roger focused, clicked, then turned the camera so that each child could see his or her own smiling face or goofy expression. They were delighted, laughing, turning to one another to share the fun. Each child wanted a turn and many children wanted more than one! Roger made sure to connect with every child in a classroom. He really didn’t have much choice!

As we walked through classrooms, we found this same eagerness in the eyes of the teachers and caregivers. Each one wanted to be noticed, hands shaken African style, eye contact, an introduction, a word. It really wasn’t much to give, but we had to pay attention.

In programs where children face the greatest challenges, the need seemed urgent. As we stood in a doorway or on the edge, they would swarm about us (of course we were obviously strangers and visitors might be few). When we visited a program where children flourish in the gifts of life, they might glance our way, but they didn’t need us or anything from us. They seemed to know they were seen.

This theme of being visible followed us home.

In the final days of rejuvenating the physical environment at Jewel’s Learning Center in Houston, Texas, *Exchange’s* Center Makeover Project (www.childcareexchange.com/makeover), in collaboration with Benjamin Moore Paints, Collaborative for Children, Community Playthings, Innovations, Lakeshore Learning Materials, Nature Explore, and *Exchange*, Director Charlotte Watts shared:

“Jewel, my mom, just can’t believe it. She can’t believe that through the magazine and the website, people all over the world know about this little program here in Houston. She just can’t believe it.”

At the 2009 World Forum in Belfast, the Global Leaders project of Zorica Trikić from Serbia was taken worldwide. Using the graphic in the button pictured here in posters, flyers, stickers, World Forum delegates were encouraged to use her work to create “See Me” campaigns in their own communities to make children and their rights and challenges more visible. (This graphic is still available for your use at www.worldforumfoundation.org/hh)

If we truly want to bring this idea home, we must think about this need for everyone in the early childhood community — directors, teachers, families, children, bus drivers, cooks, gardeners, plumbers, cleaners, grandparents, suppliers — it’s an extensive community. And of course our own need to be visible.

Thinking this way makes every interaction, every human encounter matter. It requires that we engage with our full hearts and our total attention (no multi-tasking!) every time we greet a child, question a parent, wonder with staff. Simply put — we just need to be there and the seeing will happen.

Visit Bonnie’s blog for more stories of her travels: www.worldforumfoundation.org/wf/bonnie/