

# **Bigger Than a Cupcake: Reimagining Birthday Celebrations Through an Equity and Inclusion Lens**

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## **Abstract**

This article shares the story of a preschool teacher who courageously embarked on a yearlong journey of re-envisioning how an important milestone in children’s lives—their birthdays—were celebrated in the classroom. She accepted the preschool leadership’s invitation to align birthday practices with the center’s identity influenced by the Reggio Emilia Approach. What resulted was the teacher co-constructing a new set of rituals with the children that contributed to more equitable spaces that celebrated children’s individuality and fostered agency within an inclusive child-centered, children-driven learning environment.

## **Bigger Than a Cupcake: Reimagining Birthday Celebrations Through an Equity and Inclusion Lens**

Few days are more special to a child than their birthday. During their preschool years, children begin to understand and get excited to celebrate their big day. Common to those celebrations are treats. When those celebrations take place in a classroom with an invitation for a caregiver to provide treats, it is natural for children to notice and compare how each child is celebrated. Before long, traditions form, and a bar is set. What follows for even a young child is a feeling that they need to live up to that expectation. With that comes pressure on a caregiver to provide what has now become expected.

It was on a sunny morning that a single mom entered the Ambrose Family Center Preschool holding her child’s hand while balancing a container of cupcakes. It was that special day for Asia, her fourth birthday. But there was nothing joyous in the way Asia and her mom entered the building. Asia was in tears. Mom was openly frustrated. It clearly had been a hard start to their morning. Knowing that it was Asia’s birthday, one of the directors approached to see what was wrong and offered her a hug. Through tears Asia explained that she did not like her cupcakes and did not want to take them to her classroom. Mom explained that Asia wanted the bigger cupcakes decorated with rings featuring characters from Asia’s favorite movie. The expression Asia’s mom shared with the director was deeper than frustration. There was a clear sense that the expense of the smaller rainbow-colored cupcakes was already a sacrifice and the best she could do for Asia. After having time to work through her tears and have a conversation with the director and her mom about how truly beautiful her cupcakes were, Asia made it into her classroom where the children greeted her with, “happy birthday.” The striking nature of those moments led the director to gather the preschool teachers that afternoon to share Asia’s story and consider what messages were being sent to caregivers regarding how birthdays are to be celebrated. An examination began to ascertain if those messages aligned with the vision and values the preschool professed.

The idea of an adult lens and decision making surfaced in the discussions. According to Curtis et al. (2013):

Adults have all of the power in the lives of young children. We control the time and routines. We are bigger and have more language, skills, and life experiences. We are in charge of the lights, the food, the materials, and the activities that we make available to children. We decide who and what we will pay attention to and how we will respond. ...The ways we use our power have a huge impact on children. We can use our power to support children's abilities and feelings of self-worth, or we can inadvertently use our power to oppress children and undermine their confidence and competence. It takes continual reflection and negation to use our power on behalf of children's healthy development. (p. 90)

Common approaches to celebrating birthdays in schools (e.g., bringing cupcakes and singing "Happy Birthday") are guided by adults' worldviews of what it means to celebrate, and children's voices are often marginalized. How might adults instead use their power to elevate children's voices? In response to Asia's experience, preschool staff reflected on their responsibility to honor the rights of children and determined change was necessary. Creating and sustaining inclusive and equitable spaces was essential to fulfilling this responsibility. The inspiring practices that emerged highlighted children's individuality and fostered agency. "Fostering agency in young children provides opportunities to build a child-centered and child-driven learning environment where multiple and opposing points of view, empowerment, equity, and social justice are at the center of recognizing each child's strengths and talents" (Wright, 2021, pp. 30–31).

Rituals and traditions may help children feel a sense of belonging, thus promoting a sense of community and an emotionally secure learning environment (Howell & Reinhard, 2015). Birthdays are recognized as important events in the lives of young children, and schools commonly develop their own routines, rituals, or traditions that provide expectations for how birthdays are celebrated. However, do common approaches to celebrating birthdays in schools truly help young children feel special and honored? Do they elevate children's voices? Do these rituals and traditions contribute to equitable and inclusive practices? Do these approaches promote a sense of belonging and sense of community among children? Do they have meaning to the children? These are among the questions that administrators and teachers at one preschool began asking themselves. They were concerned that birthday celebrations at their preschool, primarily focused on the common practice of bringing treats, imposed an adult worldview on children and revealed issues of inequity.

This paper documents a pivotal year for one preschool classroom as the teachers and administrators courageously embarked on a journey of aligning their form of birthday celebrations with their identity, including their vision, mission, and beliefs influenced by elements of the Reggio Emilia Approach. This is a story of how one teacher developed an innovative and inspiring approach to celebrating birthdays that resulted in her co-constructing a new set of rituals with the children. These rituals set the stage for the possibility of establishing new traditions in the years to come. Presented are key themes based on classroom blogs and an interview with the teacher that characterize the class's new approach to birthday celebrations and how the processes emerged and evolved. Furthermore, this story illustrates how children's agency can be empowered when adults work with them to co-construct meaningful rituals

(which may become traditions) in a truly inclusive environment. Inviting children to join in this work may contribute to more equitable and socially just spaces where children see themselves as part of something that is meaningful—something bigger than the self.

## **Principles of Teaching and Learning in the Reggio Emilia Approach**

The Reggio tradition promotes a strong sense of “participant democracy” that includes the rights of each child to full citizenship (Moss, 2012, Chapter 6, p. 106). The central premise is that children are inherently entitled to rights just as adults are. These rights are reflected in the Reggio Emilia Approach through values and discourse producing a learning culture that promotes the potential and participation of every child. A fundamental construct of Reggio pedagogy is the concept of “the hundred languages,” a theory that recognizes children as “possessing many cultural possibilities, which can too readily be systematically denied and taken away by the culture of school and society” (First steps: 1964-69, 2016, Chapter 2, p. 104). These “languages,” often symbolic in nature, represent the many ways children express themselves (through music, clay, dance, construction with natural materials, etc.). The hundred languages children bring invite inclusion and equitable participation through a diversity of points of view and of cultures honoring families and propelling a shared journey of learning that builds with children, teachers, and families (Cline et al., 2019).

## **The Context**

The staff at the Ambrose Family Center Preschool were engaged in a three-year study of the Reggio Emilia Approach. Together, the staff identified vision, mission, and beliefs statements to articulate a collective identity to guide their work with children and families, as well as with each other as a learning community (Figure 1). Newly developed, these values reflected what was collectively determined to be central to the culture of the preschool. It then became necessary for those values to be confirmed and sustained in practices.



Birthdays are an important milestone in the lives of young children. Birthdays place children at the center of attention for one wonderful day each year. Typically, the children in the classroom decide as a group how to celebrate each other's birthdays. Please notify your classroom teachers in advance if you would like to plan an additional treat for your child's birthday. A light snack, a chorus of "Happy Birthday," and the attention of friends and teachers are the only ingredients needed to make this day special in a preschool classroom. We encourage healthy pre-packaged snacks (preferably no cupcakes), and please check with your teachers before bringing any treats containing peanuts or nut products. Please let your teachers know if you do not wish for your child's birthday to be celebrated.

This served as a starting point for revising the handbook language to more authentically reflect the new identity of the preschool.

After a yearlong process of discussion, reviewing literature, and work sessions on revising the handbook language related to birthdays, the revised handbook entry reflected a more child-centered approach to honoring children on their birthdays:

Birthdays are an important milestone in the lives of young children. Birthdays place children at the center of attention for one wonderful day each year. At the Ambrose Family Center Preschool, children in each classroom decide as a group how to celebrate each other's birthdays through a meaningful "birthday tradition." Teachers will share with parents/guardians the "birthday tradition" for your child's classroom which does not include bringing treats from home. Please honor the very special classroom experience designed by the children as they celebrate each other's birthdays. Enjoy what is created for your child in honor of their birthday. Please let your teachers know if you do not wish for your child's birthday to be celebrated.

The new handbook language led to the codirectors inviting teachers and staff to introduce, initiate, and communicate this new thinking to children and families.

No directive as to how this was to be done was given by the codirectors; rather, an invitation went forward to teachers to research and systematically document children's ideas. Teachers were encouraged to serve as producers of research, generating new ideas about learning, rather than following certainty and traditions in order to better understand children in richer and more complex ways (Edwards, 2012, Chapter 9). This story highlights the experiences in the Pink Room, a mixed-aged classroom. While instructional responsibilities were shared in a co-teaching model, Ms. Lauren, the lead teacher at the time, assumed the primary role of planning, assessing, and documenting learning through the classroom blog which detailed the yearlong journey.

The Pink Room co-teachers were early adopters of the preschool's newly formed vision, mission, and belief statements. For example, the co-teachers were intentional in eliminating a class schedule, allowing the organization of time to belong to the children and their work to not be hurried. Embracing the invitation to rethink birthday celebrations was a natural fit for the Pink Room. After some planning, the transition was initiated by sharing the idea with the children and consistently documented throughout the course of a year as the exploration unfolded.

## A New Approach to Birthday Celebrations in the Pink Room

Ms. Lauren reviewed the revised handbook language, considering what she could do to make her classroom practices align with the preschool's new identity, specifically as it related to honoring a child's birthday. She was initially overwhelmed with the autonomy and endless possibilities but keyed in on the handbook language: "children decide as a group how to celebrate each other's birthdays." Thinking about the shared commitment of putting children first and knowing she did not have all the answers, Ms. Lauren engaged the children in conversation during class meetings where most of the shared decisions in the classroom were made. She shared control of the process with the children and trusted that they could move through the changes together. The children were accepting and excited about having conversations about their friends' birthdays and how they could be celebrated. Together they agreed that Ms. Lauren would ask the birthday child how they would like to be celebrated on their special day. The birthday child would request a gift that would be made and presented by the peers. What follows are themes and conclusions about the class's yearlong journey that emerged from the classroom blogs and teacher interview.

### Themes

#### Knowing the Child and Seeing Children as Individuals

As the celebration of birthdays developed and changed over the course of the year, children continuously revealed themselves to one another through the ritual of giving and receiving. Throughout this process there was an emphasis on *knowing the child and seeing children as individuals*. Ms. Lauren was intentional in asking each child to describe how they wanted to be celebrated and specifically what peer-created gift they might want to receive. She recognized that not all children like to be celebrated in the same way. Ms. Lauren chose to put the child first, allowing the birthday child to set the tone for their own unique celebration. Ms. Lauren described her thinking and reflections on how the birthday traditions evolved:

. . . some people like to be celebrated in a quieter way. Some people like big birthday cakes so I think I was really just thinking about the personalities of the children and the interests of each child.

And it's funny because...not too many would say, 'We need to bring in a birthday treat'... I think that was very adult-driven. So, it just showed us that, okay, they are going to be okay with receiving these gifts and their reactions show that the change was necessary.

. . . when I would hear some of these requests, oh my! And the children would get it done for sure . . . we wouldn't hurry them.

Ms. Lauren, participating alongside the children, willingly embraced the emergent nature of the process and allowed each celebration to be unique to the birthday child.

Over the course of the year, each child was honored with an individualized gift (Figure 2). No gift was replicated. Evidenced in the uniqueness of each gift, the knowledge of the child and the time given to the creators to complete the gifts took primacy in each exchange. Ms. Lauren recognized that her interpretation of the change in the handbook language regarding birthdays was grounded in her thinking about the children as individuals:

... some children would take a day or two to think about it because some gifts would take longer than one day to create. So, that was a huge change and just the length of time for a child to really feel like it was not just their day, but it was their time, I think, their time for children to make them feel special and to think about them longer than during their birthday treat.

Car Necklace	Whale Fish / Puffer Fish	Kitty Purse	Candle With Birds & Sparkles	3D-Printed Candle
				
Stroller	Ice Castle	Chocolate Chip Cookies	Red Race Car Made Out of Wood	Car Made Out of Metal Not Wood
				

Fig. 2: Summary of gifts created and shared throughout the school year.

Ms. Lauren recognized that the birthday traditions were moving beyond a moment to celebrate a child's day of birth and shifting to a period of time in which children were being honored for being unique members of the classroom community.

Gifts were created from children's individual requests and details were added based on what the gift givers knew about their classmates. During the gift making, children anticipated what the birthday child would prefer when selecting materials, choosing colors, or meeting a child's specific request. At times, the birthday child was asked specific questions about preferences. Ms. Lauren's intentional focus on the birthday child as the receiver of a gift seemed to foster children's focus on creating a gift that would please the birthday child. The process of giving and receiving was centered on honoring each child's

individuality as a member of the classroom community. The children placed their trust in the classroom community throughout the gift-making process. Each child remained at the center of the celebration, aligning with the teacher's focus on prioritizing putting children first. Ms. Lauren described the children's roles in the celebrations:

. . . they wanted to make it the best that they could for that child.

I think it showed that each child has contributions, and their contributions are special.

. . . it highlighted the contributions of all children in the classroom no matter where you are developmentally, skill level, I don't know, that makes me . . . cry.

The birthday celebrations highlighted not only the individuality of the birthday child, but also other children's unique and caring contributions to the celebration.

When asked how they would like to be celebrated, the children were revealing themselves to their teachers and classmates. The gift designers honored the individuality of the birthday child while revealing more of their own identities while making the gifts. Ms. Lauren explained:

. . . the children giving the gifts, that was also one of my favorite parts because . . . back with the birthday treats, . . . the friends were really just all concerned about the birthday treat. And when they were creating a gift for their friend, they were more concerned or thinking truly about that person, that child, you could just really see how well the children knew each other and their connections they'd make like 'No, she needs a pink purse because that's her favorite color' and 'she likes cats, so we're going to put a cat on this book'.

The blog entries communicated powerful images of the uniqueness and individuality of each birthday child, featuring photographs with captions and children's quotations that provided evidence of the children's processes and reactions. Ms. Lauren described how celebrating and documenting the birthday traditions deepened her knowledge of the individual children and resulted in her challenging some of her own assumptions:

It was interesting to me the decisions that children would make; they surprised me a lot. I would make assumptions on what a certain child would want, thinking that I knew their interests. . . . these birthday gifts gave me an insight on just another level, on who the child was and some of their interests that I could use in the future and support in the future.

The blog entry titled *Celebrating Taylor* (Figure 3) also illustrated this theme. When Taylor was asked how she would like to be celebrated on her birthday, she requested a "kitty purse." This distinct request reflected Taylor's individuality, along with Ms. Lauren's intention to see each child as an individual and celebrate Taylor as she wished to be celebrated. Ms. Lauren's written descriptions from the blog entry capture the intentionality of the children's decisions based on what they knew about Taylor:

The children found a piece of fabric they thought Taylor might like.

The children chose pink because Taylor likes pink.

Taylor requested sparkles and bows. Those were added.

The intentional selection of materials reflected what Ms. Lauren identified as “emotional thoughtfulness” during the interview as well as the children’s desire to make the best gift for their classmate, by choosing to “make it out of fabric so it lasts longer” as described in the blog entry.

<p>Taylor’s birthday is tomorrow and she asked for a kitty purse. A group of children began to discuss how they would create this gift for Taylor. Olivia said, "We need to make it out of fabric so it lasts longer." Maggie suggested that we sew the fabric because her mom showed her how to sew. The group agreed with these ideas and got to work.</p>	<p>The children found a piece of fabric they thought Taylor might like. They began by drawing an outline of a cat’s head. Then they cut it out. The children then traced their cutout so they would have two pieces to sew together.</p>		
			
<p>Ms. Lauren held the fabric as the children began to sew the pieces together.</p>			
			
<p>After the pieces were sewn together, a strap was added. The children chose pink because Taylor likes pink. They also found materials for the cat’s face. Taylor requested sparkles and bows. Those were added. The purse is complete!</p>			
			



Fig. 3: Celebrating Taylor, Pink Room classroom blog.

Taylor’s celebration also demonstrates the unique contributions of classmates to the gift-making process. Children were invited to participate and each chose if and how they would be involved. The children engaged in different aspects of the gift making and revealed their own uniqueness and individuality during the purse-making process. Taylor’s classmate, Maggie, drew on her previous experiences and suggested that they sew the fabric. The gift makers relied on each other’s knowledge of Taylor’s preferences, care and thoughtfulness, and unique skills. Taylor’s celebration provides a clear illustration of how the Pink Room celebrations focused on what was known about each child and how the teachers and children were able to see and celebrate one another as individuals as both givers and receivers of very special birthday gifts.

### Child Originated

The ideas for gifts and processes for how to plan and prepare for and carry out birthday celebrations were *child originated*. Creating was deeply rooted in the culture of the classroom. The children designed and created each of the birthday gifts in small, self-selected groups. Children were given choice in participation, and groups formed authentically with support (as opposed to direction) from the teachers. As groups of children formed, the ideas for the type of gift, materials to be used to create the gift (including process and location for production), and how the gift would be presented were guided by original ideas generated from the children.

The classroom environment included the children having access to a wide range of open-ended materials, as well as the time (within and across days) to engage in the process of creating. The ideas for the type of gifts came from the birthday child directly and were informed by knowledge of the birthday child by the group, with ranging levels of specificity. Regardless of the method used to determine what gifts would be made and the gift-making process, shared decisions—from the inception to presentation—originated from the children.

Each birthday gift was unique and unrepeatable, reflecting the idea of individual differences and the unique identity in children as demonstrated by the wide range of gifts created by the children (refer back to Figure 2). No two gifts were alike. Gifts did not seem to be significantly influenced by commercialism. Gifts were unlike what you could find in a store. Children did not request toys advertised in commercials or displayed in stores. While there were instances where popular movies may have inspired ideas (i.e., a book featuring a red car, similar to that in the Disney film “Cars”; and an ice castle, similar to that in the Disney film “Frozen”), children created one-of-a-kind representations that moved far beyond trying to reproduce any specific commercialized product. When asked if children seemed to understand that gifts would be handmade versus store-bought, Ms. Lauren explained that this assumption seemed to already be a part of the classroom culture and was not an issue.

The blogs demonstrated that the process of creating appeared to evolve, becoming increasingly complex over the course of the school year. The first birthday celebration of the year involved children collaborating to make, wrap, and present the car necklace to a classmate, all within the course of a single day. Birthday celebrations that took place later in the school year involved more steps and required longer periods of time to complete. The process of creating was unique to each birthday gift, but there were some common steps observed across the projects such as designing, creating prototypes, engaging in trial-and-error problem solving, and redesigning before arriving at a finished gift to present to the birthday child.

The story of the process of Riley’s birthday celebration provides a salient illustration of how the children planned and carried out the celebration in a complex way. As illustrated in the blog *Celebrating Riley* (Figure 4), Riley requested a “candle made out of paper with sparkles and birds.” This example shows how the children flexibly navigated the emergent, unfolding process for preparing for Riley’s birthday celebration when they added an entirely new stage by seeking out the help of the preschool’s technology specialist to create a second (even more complex) gift.

The blogs documented that children became increasingly focused on satisfaction over the course of the year. This includes the anticipated satisfaction of the receivers (from the perspective of the creators), as well as the creators’ own satisfaction in their work. The example of creating the candles for Riley provides an illustration of how the children went on to make a second gift for a child because they were excited to have the opportunity to give her what they thought she most wanted.

<p>Riley will turn 5 when we are on break! She asked the children to make her a candle out of paper. They asked her what she wanted on her candle. She wanted birds and sparkles. The children got to work!</p>				
				
<p>We overheard Riley say to herself that it would be cool to print a candle on the 3D printer. She doesn't know that we heard her, so we will surprise her!!</p>			<p>The children found a special container to keep the candle safe.</p>	
				
<p>Riley was so surprised when she was presented with her gifts! She couldn't believe that she actually got her own 3D birthday candle!</p>				
				

Fig. 4: Celebrating Riley, Pink Room classroom blog.

### Emotion and Empathy

*Emotion and empathy* were evident in the images as well as the language used in the blogs. Emotion and empathy influenced both Ms. Lauren's invitation to explore new possibilities in celebrating birthdays, as well as the children's openness to, freedom, and interpretation of that invitation. This became interconnected to the evolution of the birthday rituals that formed and re-formed over the course of the year (e.g., personalizing types of gifts, wrapping, and receiving of gifts).

Ms. Lauren openly expressed her love of birthdays and gift giving in her personal life in her interview. She interpreted the new practices and procedures regarding birthdays through this personal lens. In her interpretation, each individual child would decide what they would like to receive. She thought about children as individuals and then of herself as a giver and receiver of gifts. Ms. Lauren initiated the transition by involving the children by asking how they wanted to celebrate their birthday and what gift their peers created they might like to receive. The emotion and purposefulness of her personal gift-giving experiences transferred to her classroom community. Working alongside the children as a co-learner/investigator, Ms. Lauren participated in a mutual process of study and discussion with the children, sharing the emotion of the experience. In doing so, she recognized that she was a part of something bigger that was emerging, both in herself, as teacher, and in the children:

. . . birthday traditions were truly joyful, mutually respectful, and special experiences. I also feel that the change has moved us from thinking about the tangible way to celebrate to the emotional thoughtfulness a celebration can support and reflect.

I would feel the children were very emotional - I was excited for people's birthdays coming up - I could see how special they felt - It didn't matter if you know as an adult, you have all of these ideas of what something could look like or be like. And I think, as a child, you have the same thing. I can't remember one gift that a child didn't have a smile or got really excited . . .

The creation of Max's gift provides an illustration of the empathy and emotion children brought to the process of creating and the process of the giving of gifts (Figure 5). For Max, the children settled on making an orange stroller. The empathic connections the group of children brought to the decision to make this specific gift were that Max had a new baby at home, that he loved babies, and that his favorite color was orange. The children focused on creating something that would be meaningful to Max. This took priority over completing the gift by his birthday, with the children taking an additional two weeks to complete the stroller. The extended time to work on the stroller included test runs that resulted in bringing in an expert (Mr. Johnny, the school custodian) to help with balance and securing the wheels to the stroller. Testing also included putting a doll in the stroller and caringly covering up the "baby," as not only the fit but also the baby's comfort was important to the children. Because this gift was a long-awaited surprise for Max, wrapping the stroller was important to the children and a bigger task than they expected. The decision to cover the stroller with fabric helped protect and enhance the surprise and delight the gift evoked. The images from the blog capture the emotion of the moment when the gift was presented.

<p>The children decided that the stroller they have been working on for a few weeks is finished! In the past two weeks the children painted the stroller. Charlie suggested painting it orange because Max told him that's his favorite color. After giving the stroller one more test run, the children were not satisfied with the balance of the stroller. We asked Mr. Johnny for suggestions on ways we could fix one problem. He told us that securing our back wheels might help with the problem.</p>	<p>The children cut two more pieces to make wider legs, glued the legs on the bottom, and secured the wheels. The stroller moves better now! The children brought the stroller back to the room and decided to try it out with Owen's baby.</p>			
				
<p>Covering up the baby was important for comfort. The children felt it was a perfect fit. Wrapping the stroller was a bigger task than the children expected. They decided to cover the stroller with fabric so Max wouldn't see it.</p>	<p>Today was the day we finally gave Max his birthday gift! The children were so excited when Max arrived! Max couldn't wait to uncover his gift! "A stroller!" Max tried out his baby stroller! He loved it! He can't wait to take it home for his babies!</p>			
				

Fig. 5: Celebrating Max, Pink Room classroom blog.

Ms. Lauren recognized virtues related to empathy and emotions as being important factors in the classroom culture that was also forming. She embraced the challenge of creating a classroom environment that would nurture ongoing empathic connections, guided by the teacher but created by the children. One of the key characteristics of the Pink Room community was a focus on care. Central to this was the concept of respect—being gracious, making someone feel special, and listening—exemplified through the children's experiences of the creating, giving, and receiving of gifts. By intentionally emphasizing these characteristics, they became embedded in the daily classroom environment. Ms. Lauren described this focus on care in the following ways:

. . . creating a culture of care from the very beginning is essential to this. And so, some of the questions you asked about . . . being a gracious receiver, I think that's all embedded in a culture of care. And, respect, I think that's a huge word for early childhood and what does that really mean. That's why I like to use the word "care."

. . . these birthday traditions contribute to the characteristics and the culture of the classroom, and so children can see . . . 'How do you make someone feel special?' 'What does care look like?' 'What does it look like to listen to one another?' So just having all of those questions, as an adult in the back of your head, and to just continue to challenge to create an environment where all of those kinds of characteristics and that culture can be created by the children and the adults, I think they work hand-in-hand, the characteristics are embedded. It should be embedded from the beginning . . .

As a result of this intentional focus, Ms. Lauren noticed children seeing their peers differently than they had before. Children became aware of each other's unique skills/talents and how those skills might contribute to the creation of the birthday gifts. These contributions made each child feel a part of something special in an inclusive environment; that their friends cared for them in a very human way:

I saw children look at some of their peers in a different way that they might not have before . . . their contributions, I think it really highlighted what each child in the classroom had to offer in, in not just a tangible way, . . . they know how to hammer a nail, but in a way where they saw that their friends cared about them.

And that they didn't just rush through some work to get a product to be given . . . to them. . . . I think the outcome was a creation of a culture of care. I think we always are working on that as human beings. It was something that you could just see and be a part of and feel it and know that . . . they truly care about each other. So, that's the biggest one. It's hard to get past once you feel like you are part of a culture like that it's alongside children, . . . you just feel like you're part of something that's great.

## Life Lessons

Ms. Lauren demonstrated that she recognized that the children's experiences in the classroom afforded opportunities for foundational *life lessons* including lessons about relationships and what it means to be part of an inclusive and equitable community. Such lessons could be lived out in the context of the classroom and beyond that, carried forward throughout life. Ms. Lauren wanted children to learn not just how to celebrate a birthday but to celebrate—and be in community with—one another.

Ms. Lauren expressed concerns about the former approach to celebrating birthdays in her classroom. As demonstrated through her words, she did not see this approach as consistent with the school's belief about putting children first. Furthermore, she expressed concern about how it was influencing children's experiences and shaping their views about what they should expect on another child's birthday:

We really thought about putting the child first, does the birthday treat truly make that child feel special on their birthday? What are the other children thinking about that child's birthday? We'd just see children say, 'What did you bring?' and you know, not even say 'Happy birthday.' Just 'What treat did you bring? What treat did you bring?'

Ms. Lauren saw the new approach to birthday celebrations as providing an opportunity for children to learn about what it means to authentically celebrate one another, which she considered to be a valuable life lesson. Furthermore, the new approach provided an opportunity to practice being a member of a community, including in the roles of giver and receiver:

. . . learning to be a great human being and being a part of life, and how you interact with each other, and how to be a giver and a receiver, and how to make people feel special and care for each other, I think it is the biggest life lesson, I guess. I think it just contributes to a bigger idea or a bigger thing.

Ms. Lauren was mindful of her role in the classroom community, and this extended to birthday celebrations. While the ways that birthdays were celebrated were child originated, Ms. Lauren still saw and valued her own role as a participant and model in the classroom community as children learned life lessons:

My role now, as things have shifted, is that I get to be a part of actually celebrating who the child is and being a part of making that child feel special. And then also, modeling and just being a part of the gift giving process. I love to give gifts, and so just being a part [of it] and seeing how a 3-year-old, 4-year-old, 5-year-old can love it just as much and they're creating, you know, they're intentional in creating something so special for [someone] else. I think that just being a part of that makes this just a life lesson and it's changed from being a school birthday celebration to, I think that's how it shifts to tradition, just being a part of life, being a giver and a gracious receiver. And so, I just felt a part, alongside of the child, a part of something bigger than a cupcake.

## Conclusion

Birthdays are special occasions for young children. In schools and classrooms, rituals and traditions play a role in contributing to the community that forms. Adults play a powerful role in a young child's life. Constructs like time, routines, and traditions are most often in the control of adults, including common approaches to celebrating birthdays guided by an adult worldview. In response to Asia's experience, preschool staff reflected on their responsibility as adults and determined that change was necessary. Adults used their power to elevate children's voices. Re-envisioning the rituals and traditions of celebrating birthdays in schools through the eyes of the children offers a unique window into creating inclusive and equitable spaces that highlight children's individuality and foster agency within an inclusive child-centered, and child-driven learning environment.

What insight might early childhood teachers and school leaders gain from Ms. Lauren's and the children's journey? Considerations from this story are broader than simply re-envisioning birthday celebrations. This story invites an awakening to and interrogation of routines and traditions that blindly continue in our spaces of learning. What innovative and equity-advancing discoveries might unfold as we give voice to the children to help us see new possibilities and become less sure of current practices?

Behind every decision is a choice of values and ethics (Rinaldi, 2001). Early childhood teachers and school leaders can begin by thoroughly and full-heartedly embracing an equitable and inclusive child-centered approach in their unique context. They can develop and commit to living out a school-wide (or classroom) identity grounded in mission, values, and beliefs that center on children's extraordinary potentials, competencies, and autonomies (Malaguzzi, 1993). And finally, they can embrace an attitude of not-knowing and discovery as a perpetual researcher to gain unique insights into children's ways of thinking that lead to co-constructing meaningful rituals, which may lead to traditions that truly honor every child. In the end, this story is not a story of birthday celebrations but one of creating an environment that has the potential to empower children and help them to see themselves as part of something meaningful. In this case, something bigger than a cupcake.

### Note

The actual name of the child whose story was shared in the opening of this paper has been replaced with a pseudonym. The names of all other children in this paper are actual names used with the families' permission.

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