A Manner of Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

“I expect something to happen, and then it does.” — Vickie Loghmanieh, University at Buffalo Child Care Center

The story of the work of Vickie Loghmanieh is one I have heard before, in many different ways, from and about the directors I have met in my life in early childhood. Many directors of early childhood programs are incredibly effective changemakers. They are constantly surprising others by what they are able to accomplish. “I never thought it would happen” — but it did. “I never thought she could get them to listen” — but she did. Stories, hundreds of them, about people who are able to get their way. And, more amazing, they are able to effectively create change, without whining or complaining, without making others defensive. Perhaps this is the secret to effective change — knowing exactly what must happen.

Expectation is a remarkably effective tool in determining the future. As educators, we all know the importance of our expectations in shaping the behavior of others. If we expect Sam to be a troublemaker, he will undoubtedly knock over Abigail’s block tower on his way to the toilet. If we expect Charlotte to be the perfect “little mother,” she will spend her time in the house corner. In fact, we have been cautioned by literature and research to guard our expectations, weeding out the harmful, sexist, racist ones in order to see the actual child before us. As supervisors, we know that if we expect Ronald to complain, or Betty to effuse, they will. We know that our expectations impact the actions of others.

But sometimes we forget this when it comes to life’s broader issues. In our roles as advocates, we sometimes forget. We apologize for what we are asking our communities to understand. We apologize for our efforts to make our programs financially strong, to offer living wages for our staff. We know what is good for our children — for all children. I mean we really know this, and yet we hesitate when we say, “Get rid of the guns,” when we say that children need beautiful spaces with plants and animals and trees to climb. Sometimes we ask questions, “Well, don’t you think?” But there are times, those times when we truly know that we are right, when the issue has nothing to do with the other person. There is just the conviction that this has to happen for the good of children. It just has to. No questions. No whining. No apologies. No hesitation.

Being right just isn’t enough. We must all learn how to present our expectations in such a way that others are able to hear them and are impelled to action. It’s a big responsibility to know something, and a bigger task to create action from knowledge. It starts with self-knowledge, understanding our own worth — believing that what we know must happen, will.