
Seen *and* **Heard**

Children's Rights in Early Childhood Education

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Foreword by Bonnie Neugebauer



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Foreword

Knowing, really believing, that children have rights is a huge responsibility. Understanding that all children have the same rights, regardless of their circumstances at birth, is a point of crisis for us as adults. Because if we really know this, what excuses can we possibly offer for the disparity of circumstances for children around the world?

Traditionally we think of rights as something bestowed, as if we hold the power to give these rights to children. This thinking provides a kind of safety net. If rights were ours to give, then there would be a way out of our responsibility—if the challenges are overwhelming, we can tell ourselves that we have done all that we can. But the mind shift to an understanding that children already have these rights, irrespective of our powers in play, means that all we can do is to honor these rights—or take them away.

What we feel about children's rights affects everything. It impacts how we are with children, what we offer, what we say, how we listen, the questions we ask, the opportunities we provide. It affects how we spend resources and what our priorities look like. We need to be clear about this. Believing in children's rights takes away the excuses, and our failures are laid bare for all to see. It's quite uncomfortable to have no way out of our obligations.

But in the same breath, if we do not give children their rights but rather know them to be birthrights, we do not bear sole responsibility for protecting these rights. Children themselves must be involved in using and safeguarding their rights. Our duty becomes that of enabling children to see and understand what their rights are—of exploring and learning, testing, questioning. Children need to own their rights and they need to understand the responsibilities that are embedded within them.

And then we must work together with children to protect these rights—empowering children to speak for themselves. Sometimes our best action is to get out of the way.

Through respectful and joyful explorations, Ellen Hall and Jennifer Rudkin have learned about rights with and from children. They have discovered how children understand rights and how rights issues impact life in a learning community. Through their work, they encourage all of us to do less speaking for children and more listening to what children have to share with us.

We have important work to do. Accepting our responsibilities to support the fundamental birthright of children gives us a new framework for being with children. *Seen and Heard: Children's Rights in Early Childhood Education* gives us the inspiration to see the possibilities for our journey.

—Bonnie Neugebauer

Introduction

This book summarizes research and theory as they pertain to young children's rights in the United States and illustrates key points through vivid stories and images collected at Boulder Journey School. Boulder Journey School is a school in Boulder, Colorado, where educators work alongside children aged 6 weeks to 6 years and their families. Since 1995, Boulder Journey School has studied the philosophy and pedagogy of the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Reggio Emilia's infant-toddler centers and preschools grew from community-run schools established largely by mothers in the wake of World War II. The threat of fascism convinced residents of the need to create schools that would encourage children to think and act for themselves. The early education schools of Reggio Emilia gained international attention in 1991 when a panel of experts commissioned by *Newsweek* magazine identified the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia as the best in the world (Municipality of Reggio Emilia Infant Toddler Centers and Preschools, 1999). Today, Reggio Emilia is a place of inspiration and collaboration for educators and researchers throughout the world dedicated to working with young children.

FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS

Three overlapping ideas are foundational to the Reggio Emilia approach, to Boulder Journey School, and to this book. The first is the notion of *the hundred languages of children*. Loris Malaguzzi, key architect of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education, observed that young children participate in the world using "one hundred languages" for exploring, discovering, constructing, representing, and conveying their ideas.

The child has a hundred languages
A hundred hands
A hundred thoughts
A hundred ways of thinking (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 3)

In our culture, which often renders children invisible and silences young voices, it is important to honor the many ways in which children express themselves.

The second notion is the *pedagogy of listening*. Pedagogista Carlina Rinaldi has worked with educators in Reggio Emilia for over 40 years, “cultivating an attitude of ‘learning’ to learn (as John Dewey called it), an openness to change, and a willingness to discuss opposing points of view” (Filippini in Edwards et al., 1998, p. 130). Rinaldi speaks and writes eloquently about the importance of creating a context within which children and adults carefully attend to the world and to one another as they shape and reshape their questions and theories. In her words, “Very early in life, children demonstrate that they have a voice, but above all that they know how to listen and be listened to” (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 82).

The third essential idea, and the central tenet of this book, is that all children have the right to participate in the communities in which they reside, not as future citizens, but as citizens of the present. The idea that children have a right to participate in their communities gained unprecedented attention and legitimacy in 1989 when world leaders ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC was the first legally binding international instrument to recognize the civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights of children. The UNCRC was a groundbreaking document for many reasons, not the least of which is its assertion that children have the right to participation, as well as protection and provision. Discourse on children’s rights has long encompassed the need for adults to *provide* the resources necessary for children to survive and grow to their full potential, and the need for adults to *protect* children from harm, including abuse and exploitation. The UNCRC held that adults also have a responsibility to honor children’s right to *participate* in family, cultural, and social life (UNICEF, n.d.).

The UNCRC inspired numerous articles, chapters, and books about children’s rights. As a result, the collective sensitivity to children’s rights has grown, although certainly there remains much distance to travel. The world community recently celebrated the 20th anniversary of the UNCRC, and so this is a fitting time to consider the enormous strides many have made on behalf of children and also to suggest directions for future growth.

DISTINCTIVE FOCUS

This book differs from existing books about children’s rights in two important ways. First, this book focuses on *young* children’s rights, whereas much of the literature on children’s rights centers on the concerns of older children and adolescents, age groups where the line between childhood and adulthood blurs. The current discourse on children’s rights often has ignored young children, for two reasons. First, adults tend to view infants, toddlers, and preschoolers as immature, dependent, and not yet fully formed, making the concept of rights irrelevant to them (e.g., Pugh & Selleck, 1996). Priscilla Alderson (2000b) noted a prevailing view of children as human *becomings* rather than human *beings*. A partial person could never be considered equal to a whole person, and so in this view children would not be entitled to the same rights as adults. An alternative view holds that children and adults are both human beings in the present, and also human becom-

ings in that we all grow, learn, and change throughout our lives. A second reason why young children's rights have been neglected in the children's rights literature is that assessing the ideas of children, especially children who are not yet verbal, is challenging and requires novel approaches to research. Because educators at Boulder Journey School work with children as young as 6 weeks, we have tried to represent the voices of children beginning in infancy.

The second way in which this book differs from existing books is its commitment to considering young children's rights from the perspectives of the children themselves—a challenge that is even more notable given our focus on young children. Only a small subset of the growing literature on children's rights explores children's rights from children's perspectives (e.g., Cherney & Perry, 1996; S. Hart, Zeidner, & Pavlovic, 1996; Melton, 1980; Osler, 1998). Because a commitment to children's rights honors the voices of children, scholarship on this topic must include the children's own perspectives (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundedide, 2010). We believe that attentive listeners recognize wisdom in the communications of even the youngest children. Throughout this book we place children's words in a different font as a reminder to pay attention to their words, much in the way Georgia O'Keefe compelled people to recognize the beauty of small flowers by painting them on giant canvases. In addition, we attend to the "hundred" nonverbal languages in which children express themselves, by including painting, drawing, and photography. The book also includes many photographs of children at work and play. Thus, the pages of this book are very image-rich.

In this book, most of the images and stories that bring to life the scholarship on children's rights were collected at Boulder Journey School. The city of Boulder's population is 88% Caucasian, with an average household income above the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Most of the children who appear in the pages that follow are fortunate in that they are not denied the rights to provision and protection. The authors would like to present our insights into children's right to participation, gleaned at Boulder Journey School, with respect for the plight of children and adults who are living and working in contexts permeated with violence, hunger, homelessness, and despair.

Although this book is centered within a school for young children and has particular relevance to teachers, administrators, and staff in educational contexts, we have tried to attend also to the perspectives of parents and other community members. Our hope is that this book's blend of scholarship and practice will appeal to students and practitioners in a variety of fields, as well as to all people who care about children.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

The book consists of six chapters that build on one another but also can be read as independent essays.

Chapter 1: The first chapter is an introduction to the general issues around children's rights and to the context in which these issues are explored, Boulder

Journey School. Children's rights are about adult ears as much as children's voices. This chapter offers advice to adults dedicated to listening to the voices of young children, such as the importance of honoring nonverbal communication and of adopting a patient attitude. A highlight of this chapter is a list of 61 rights generated by children at Boulder Journey School. This list is revisited throughout the book.

Chapter 2: This chapter is a consideration of the ways in which the struggle for children's rights parallels the struggles of earlier rights movements. This chapter compares and contrasts the children's rights movement with three other rights movements: Black civil rights, women's liberation, and disability rights. Issues explored include invisibility, disparities in size and strength, and the distinction between dependence and interdependence.

Chapter 3: While the previous chapter explored commonalities among the children's rights movement and other movements, this chapter takes the opposite approach, delineating what is unique about children's rights. It discusses the importance of (1) "child" as a status we all belong or have belonged to, (2) adult-child differences in bodies and minds, (3) differences in life experience, and (4) the unique love between adult and child.

Chapter 4: This chapter addresses the misconception that children focused on their own rights fail to develop a concern for others. We believe that respect for rights and assumption of social responsibility go hand in hand. We examine the role of adults in fostering children's citizenship, which includes respecting children's right to make their own decisions and the need for conflict.

Chapter 5: This chapter follows the thoughts and actions of a group of young children involved in a long-term project to build a city for their classroom hamster. As they consider how to create a just and beautiful world for Crystal the hamster, they uncover lessons with relevance to us all.

Chapter 6: The final chapter examines the importance of places children can claim as their own, where they can go alone or with other children. In these special places, children construct an understanding of their lives in the present and engage in rehearsals of future lives of their own creation.

We hope this book nurtures for our readers a space from which to explore, appreciate, and articulate ideas about young children's rights. This space may not always be a comfortable one, but true change requires embracing the unfamiliar. It is worth noting that this book developed as a dialogue between its two authors. During the course of more than 4 years, we talked about the content of this book over coffee. We shared our current experiences with the children in our lives, as well as our memories of the past and predictions for the future; fears as well as dreams, disappointments as well as visions. These exchanges pushed our thoughts beyond what would have been possible alone and resulted in new understandings for both of us. We hope that this book also inspires our readers to talk with others and reach a deeper and more thoughtful understanding of children's rights. To further

this goal, each chapter ends with provocative discussion questions and activities that extend key ideas from the chapter.

We anticipate that the book will encourage critical thought, launch conversations, challenge behaviors that are not in line with beliefs, and remind us to question the necessity of social mores that fail to honor young children. When we remember to question the status quo, new ways of being and relating become possible.

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