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giving value to the rights of children: questions for consideration by a school community

by Ellen Hall

Boulder Journey School is a school for young children, ages six weeks to six years, and their families. Since 1995, as a school community, we have been engaged in a study of the world-renowned schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy. As a result of our study and collaboration with educators in Reggio Emilia and with educators around the world who are inspired and encouraged by the schools in Reggio Emilia, many aspects of our life at Boulder Journey School have evolved, including our recognition of children as citizens — not future citizens but rather citizens of the present — with inherent and irrefutable rights, which include the right to participation in communities that afford them visibility and voice.

Loris Malaguzzi, architect of the Reggio Emilia experience wrote:

“Children have the right to be recognized as subjects of individual, legal, civil, and social rights; as both source and constructors of their own experience, and thus active participants in the organization of their identities, abilities, and autonomy, through relationships and interaction with their peers, with adults, with ideas, with objects, and with the real and imaginary events of intercommunicating worlds” (Malaguzzi, 1995, p. 67).

At Boulder Journey School, we maintain that children's contributions are essential. Their ideas and opinions are expected, invited, acknowledged, and respected. Further, as a school community, we have undertaken a long-term study of children's rights with an emphasis on children's visibility, voice, and civic participation. (Note: A book about this study is currently being reviewed for publication.)

Highlighting this study and reminding us of our commitment to the rights of all children is the

Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights, composed in early 2003 by a group of four-year-old children, which hangs prominently in the hallway of Boulder Journey School.

The catalyst for the composition of this charter was the war in Iraq, specifically a sign held by one of the children during his participation in a local peace rally and then carefully carried to school to share with classmates. The sign read, “World Rebuffs U.S. On Iraq” and in the accompanying chant the child declared, “1, 2, 3, 4 . . . we don't want your muddy war”. The sign was intriguing to the children in this child's classroom and became the impetus for a conversation among children and adults surrounding the beginning of the U.S. military campaign. During the conversation, one of the children asserted, “Soldiers don't have the right to kill other people,” which led the teachers to wonder what the children thought about the concept of rights. They arranged a meeting of a small group of children and posed the question, “What is a right? If someone says, ‘I have a right to do that,’ or, ‘I have a right to think that way,’ what does it mean?” (Hillman, 2003). The children discussed their ideas until they agreed on statements made by two children. One child stated, “A right is like you know in your heart it's okay to do it . . . you can do it if you want and that's it,” to which another child added, “But only if it's okay, like you won't hurt somebody and it's not safe . . . because the other person has a right to not be hurt too, right?”

Ensuing conversations that included children, faculty, and families led to the compilation of the children's ideas concerning their rights, and thus the *Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights*, as it appears below was born (Hall, 2003; Pufall, Rudkin, & Hall, 2004; Rudkin & Hall, 2005; Rudkin & Hall, 2006; Rudkin & Hall, 2007).

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Beginnings Workshop

At Boulder
Journey School,
we maintain
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Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights

- Children have a right to plant flowers and plants with other people
- Children have a right to grow taller
- Children have a right to run or walk, to choose which one, if it's safe
- Children have a right to have friends
- Children have a right to touch everything, but gently, but not birds because that can scare them very much
- Children have a right to pretend that there's a beach anywhere
- Children have a right to pretend everything
- Children have a right to pretend with glass, but not a right to drop it 'cause that's not safe
- Children have a right to climb mountains, ski on the mountains (when there is snow), and play on the mountains (because the mountains are there for all of us to use)
- Children have a right to take off their clothes when they are hot, but not their socks
- Children have a right to have fun
- Children have a right to read books when they are crying (so they don't have to talk about it right away)
- Children have a right to sing, and to sing to other people
- Children have a right to help other people and even birds with broken wings (so it's okay for people to touch them)
- Children have a right to play all day
- Children have a right to twist their own ears, but not a right to twist other people's ears (when a child must ask the other person first)
- Children have a right to be asked if someone wants to twist their ears
- Children have a right to guess how things work
- Children have a right to be in love and love each other
- Children have a right to eat grapes whichever way they choose, like peeling them first, if they want
- Children have a right to make ideas with other people
- Children have a right to be safe from fires and have firefighters ready to help them if there is a fire
- Children have a right to fall down when they feel like being crazy
- Children have a right to sleep when they are tired, or not to sleep when they are not tired, like just resting
- Children have a right to have their hair look like they want, but not a right to cut it unless they ask first
- Children have a right to choose their own clothes (and parents have a right to buy clothes for children if they want, but parents do not have a right to steal clothes)
- Children have a right to never, never go to jail
- Children have a right to pretend being dead and think about what it means to be dead
- Children have a right to eat some cheese or an apple when they are hungry
- Children have a right to good stuff that makes them happy
- Children have a right to clean air
- Children have a right to clean, fresh food to eat and if the food is dirty, they can say, "NO!"
- Children have a right to clean, cold water or clean, hot water or clean, warm water
- Children have a right to chew soft gum especially if it's the kind that cleans your teeth, but not a right to hard gum, like one might find at Copper Mountain's gumball machine
- Children have a right to talk, as long as they do not interrupt someone else who is talking first, but children have a right to wait for their turn to talk
- Children have a right to color with paint or markers and to choose which one
- Children have a right to eat brownies and make brownies
- Children have a right to get their own silverware
- Children have a right to brush their own teeth (and parents have a right to check their teeth when the children are done brushing)
- Children have a right to say, "No!" or "Stop it!" when people are tickling them without asking
- Children have a right to say, "Yes!" when people tickle them, too
- Children have a right to have their words heard by other people
- Children have a right to be listened to
- Children have a right to walk away from people who are bothering them, but ask the bothering people to stop first to see if that works
- Children have a right to tell silly jokes
- Children have a right to build bridges out of peppers and other silly things with their lunch, if they can eat it, too
- Children have a right to know what time it is, and how many minutes they have to wait for something (their turn), and the time it will be when it's finally their turn

Giving value to children's rights as an important aspect of our school's culture, means giving careful consideration to this value and its translation during the daily moments of our lives in the school.

- Children have a right to wrestle or play fight, but not a right to punch (and maybe they can play rough on a bed)
- Children have a right to not be called names
- Children have a right to play tea parties, even with real tea
- Children have a right to crawl like kitties
- Children have a right to paint their fingernails, boys and girls, with their Moms
- Children have a right to hug and kiss
- Children have a right to say, "No" to mouth kisses
- Children have a right to play with Mom and Dad (after they are busy)
- Children have a right to watch kid TV shows, but not adult shows (because they are boring)
- Children have a right to watch adult TV shows if Mom or Dad say "okay" like Enterprise or Survivor
- Children have a right to watch movies, but not scary ones, but actually, they can watch a scary movie every once in a while
- Children have a right to tell parents and teachers to help them if they have a big problem
- Children have a right to solve their own problems whenever they can
- Children have a right to hang upside-down when it's safe

The Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights gives credence to the idea that young children have relevant insights into the issue of children's rights and the ways in which they pertain to their own lives. Giving value to children's rights as an important aspect of our school's culture, means giving careful consideration to this value and its translation during the daily moments of our lives in the school.

Some of our ongoing questions for consideration include:

1. Do we enter children's spaces uninvited? Do we move children (i.e., from the floor to our arms), without their knowledge or consent? Or do we seek children's permission to engage with them?

In the *Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights*, the children write: **Children have a right to walk away from people who are bothering them, but ask the bothering people to stop first to see if that works.**

Assuming that children have the right to walk away or protest when they are bothered, how do we respect the rights of children who are not yet walking and not yet talking? How do we respect the rights of children who are challenged in these areas as well as those who may never be able to walk or to communicate verbally?

2. Do we intervene in children's relationships when problems arise? Or do we afford children the time and space that may be required to resolve their own issues?

Returning to the *Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights*, the children write: **Children have a right to solve their own problems whenever they can.**

While respecting children's rights to disagree, debate, negotiate, compromise etc., can we also respect their right to the comfort of caring adults who support their social and emotional learning? How do we balance these potentially conflicting rights to protection and participation?

3. Do we do things for children that we can do with them or that they can do on their own? Do we attempt to teach children things that they are capable of learning on their own? Or do we support and encourage children's autonomy, both individually and with their peers?

Again turning to the children's charter, they write:



Beginnings Workshop

If we are a school of children rather than a school for children, how can our respect for children, how can our respect for children's rights extend to their right to revisit and reflect on classroom experiences that are used by adults to support and extend these experiences and to make them visible?

Children have a right to make ideas with other people.

If we are a school of children rather than a school for children, how can our respect for children's rights extend to their right to revisit and reflect on classroom experiences that are used by adults to support and extend these experiences and to make them visible? In what ways can children be made aware of the vast quantity and variety of materials available to them in order "to make ideas with other people"?

4. While the children are engaged in learning experiences, as adult observers and supporters, are we also learners ourselves and if so, do we bring our learning to share with the children?

Philosopher, educator and colleague of Loris Malaguzzi, David Hawkins cautioned:

"An environment of 'loving' adults who are themselves alienated from the world around them is an educational vacuum. Adults involved in the world of man and nature must bring that world with them to children, bounded and made safe to be sure, but not thereby losing its richness and promise of novelty" (Hawkins, 1997, p. 350).

As we continue to consider the questions inherent in our study of children's rights at Boulder Journey School, we think that our most poignant understandings, which often lead to further questions, come from listening to the children (Rinaldi, 2001). Not surprisingly, the children who wrote the *Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights*, considered this a right: **Children have a right to be listened to.**

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