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On: 27 February 2014, At: 12:49

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



The New Educator

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/utne20>

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Published online: 25 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Mara Krechevsky, Ben Mardell & Angela N. Romans (2014) Engaging City Hall: Children as Citizens, *The New Educator*, 10:1, 10-20, DOI: [10.1080/1547688X.2014.868212](https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2014.868212)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2014.868212>

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Engaging City Hall: Children as Citizens

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In this article, the authors suggest that current notions of advocacy in early childhood education should be expanded to include a view of young children as citizens. The authors ground their discussion in a how-to book project in Providence, Rhode Island, consider different concepts of children and citizenship, share commentary from City Hall and propose four key features of their perspective: (a) highlighting the civic nature of schools as central to the teaching and learning process; (b) focusing on young children's distinctive perspectives and competencies, not just their needs; (c) providing professional development around shared projects that promote literacy and higher order thinking skills; and (d) documenting children's learning in order to challenge assumptions about their capabilities and put forth an alternative image of teaching and learning.

A PROVOCATION TO THE FIELD

Consider the photograph in Figure 1 from the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia. What do you notice? What surprises you? What thoughts and feelings come up? How does the photograph influence your image of young children's roles in the community?

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FIGURE 1. Child from a Reggio Emilia municipal preschool at the opening ceremony of the 2012 International Photography Festival. (color figure available online.)

A child's status as citizen is enshrined in the Italian Constitution. In Reggio Emilia, children are referred to as *protagonists*. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2013) defines a protagonist as "a leading actor, character or participant in a literary work or real event or a leader, proponent, or supporter of a cause." What would it mean for children to actively participate in, support, and even lead in their local communities? Four-year-olds do not vote. Nor do they serve on juries. Yet might children be considered citizens from birth?

In this article, we hope to provoke current notions of advocacy models for early childhood education. The early education field is blessed with many talented and thoughtful teachers, administrators, professional development providers, and advocates who work tirelessly—though often in isolation—to advance the cause of high-quality education for all children. Advocacy efforts typically entail lobbying, letter-writing campaigns, talking to the press, petitions, testifying before committees and in court, and writing reports. Early childhood advocates tackle real and important issues, but often from solely a needs-based perspective.

In these forms of advocacy, children are almost always seen as passive or dependent on adults to protect them and to ensure that their needs are being met. Although critical, these efforts seldom provide opportunities for children's contributions as capable and competent protagonists. Children's

(and sometimes teachers') involvement in advocacy often seems to serve as window dressing. Children are invited to state house rallies to hold signs they cannot read or do not understand or to contribute artwork for causes about which they are not fully informed. Although it is tempting to draw on the *cuteness* factor of young children in advocacy, trivializing the powerful thinking young children are capable of may ultimately undermine the very cause the advocacy is intended to serve.

In what follows, the authors (two educational researchers and an education policy advisor) build on the work of colleagues in Reggio Emilia and elsewhere to put forth a view of young children as citizens who can play a key role in engaging policymakers and others in promoting quality early childhood education. We ground our discussion in a how-to book project in Providence, Rhode Island, consider different views of children and citizenship, identify key features of our perspective and close with commentary from inside City Hall.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF CITY HALL

According to cognitive psychologist David Perkins, sustained educational reform requires three visionaries for change—a theoretical visionary (who provides a big idea and asks important questions), a practical visionary (who provides on-the-ground direction and guidance to achieve the change), and a political visionary (who provides the resources needed to support the change). Political leadership is especially important in the early childhood field. Young children have the least power in our society. A recent report by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2012) concludes, "Leadership matters. Without a guiding force and tireless advocate working with federal, state and local governments on behalf of young children, early learning is often overlooked." [wttp://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2012/six_state_leaders_who_have_driven_early_childhood_reforms-68551](http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2012/six_state_leaders_who_have_driven_early_childhood_reforms-68551)

Mayors are often the logical political visionaries, but attracting the attention of City Hall can be challenging. Mayors are besieged by constant requests to address a myriad of problems. In Providence, early childhood education is a priority for Mayor Angel Taveras. Without a doubt, the mayor's biography plays a role in his commitment to early childhood education; he attended Head Start and credits the program with launching a successful academic career that led him to Harvard College and Georgetown Law School. The mayor actively uses his office to support the learning of children and the community. At the same time, the Providence early childhood community's strategic use of the idea of children as citizens has broadened the mayor's work in this area.

THE HOW-TO BOOK PROJECT

The How-to Book project was a collaboration between *Making Learning Visible*, a research project at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and *Ready to Learn Providence*, a community-based school readiness initiative.¹ In 2011, Project Zero researcher Ben Mardell taught a 5-month professional development course in Providence for 22 early childhood teachers from community-based centers, Head Start classrooms, and family childcare settings throughout the state. To provide a common focus, Mardell proposed that teachers help children in their classrooms make how-to books as a way to demonstrate the children's expertise. To begin the project, we solicited and helped draft a letter from Mayor Taveras that the teachers read to the children, asking them to think about what they were expert at and then make a book sharing their expertise. The mayor encouraged children to take their time and get comments from teachers, family, and friends; he also revealed plans to display the books publicly (see Figure 2).

When 4-year-old Leah Ramos heard the letter, she announced, "I'm going to teach the mayor how to whistle." Her teachers transcribed her directions and classmates tested them out, giving her feedback such as to insert the word "small" before the word "hole" in the instruction "make a hole with your mouth." Leah also created detailed drawings illustrating each step in her directions (see Figure 3).²

Across the state teachers helped children think about what they knew well and create directions to share their expertise with others. Classmates provided feedback that informed new drafts. Ultimately, the children created 105 how-to books, including *How to Be a Big Brother*, *How to Sing in the Living Room*, and *How to Fly Like Superman*.

The how-to books were displayed at the Providence Children's Museum. Six hundred and fifty children and their families, teachers, and members of the community were on hand for the opening event (see Figure 4). Several adults created how-to books as well. Rhode Island Commissioner of Education Deborah Gist shared her book, *How to Be Commissioner of Education*, with the group. Parents beamed as they found their children's books on display.

At a second event at the Providence Public Library, Mayor Taveras read his book, *How to Do Well in School*, to 80 preschoolers. When the mayor asked if anyone else wanted to share a book, Leah's hand immediately shot into the air. She came forward, shook the mayor's hand and confidently read her book about whistling (see Figure 5). The books were also displayed at City Hall in September to coincide with National Literacy Month.

¹For information on *Making Learning Visible*, see Krechevsky, Mardell, Rivard, and Wilson (2013). To learn more about *Ready to Learn Providence*, see <http://r2lp.org/>.

²To see Leah's book go to: http://issuu.com/r2lp/docs/how_to_whistle/1.



CITY OF PROVIDENCE

Angel Taveras, Mayor

September 19, 2011

Dear young Providence residents,

Grown-ups do not always realize how smart children are. I want them to know that you know a lot of things. You are experts on how to play and how to tell stories. Some of you know how to ride a bike, how to draw a person or how to make a sandwich. I am sure you know how to do many things well.

I would like you to think of something you know a lot about and make a "how to book" explaining how you do it. Take your time in making your book, and get comments from your teachers, family and friends.

Work hard on your books since many people will see them. There are plans to display your books at the Providence Children's Museum and our public libraries. That way, lots of people, children and adults, can learn from you. You will also have a chance to learn from other children's ideas.

A few of us adults want to make a how-to book too. Do you have any suggestions about what we should write about?

I look forward to reading your books.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Angel Taveras'.

Angel Taveras
Mayor

FIGURE 2. The letter from Mayor Taveras.

A VIEW OF CHILDREN AS CITIZENS

The concepts of *citizenship* and *childhood* are not straightforward. According to Australian scholar Margaret Coady:

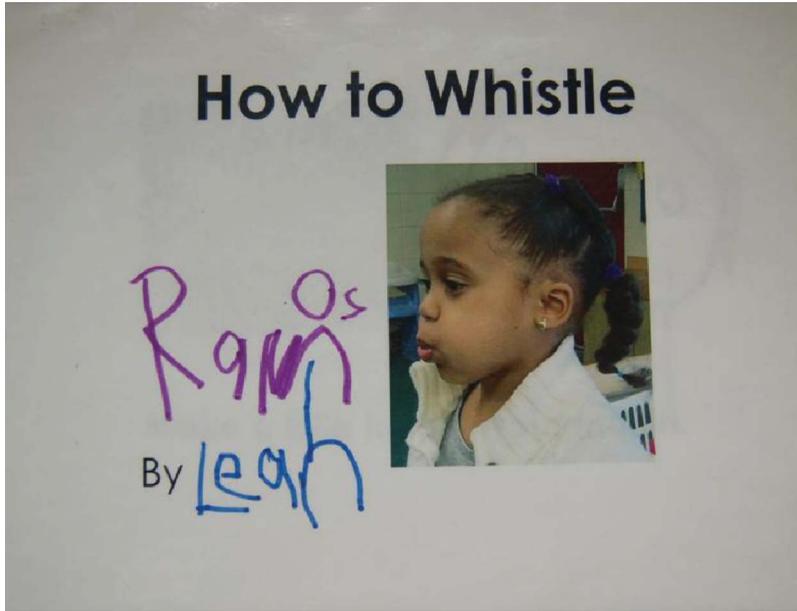


FIGURE 3. Leah's book. (color figure available online.)



FIGURE 4. The Providence Children's Museum Event. (color figure available online.)



FIGURE 5. Mayor Taveras and Leah shake hands at the library. (color figure available online.)

Children have variously been seen as property, as playthings, as future citizens, and as immature adults whose only task is to grow up. Citizenship has also been constructed in many different ways but very often as an exclusionary device declaring certain groups beyond full membership of the state. Women, indigenous people, slaves, refugees and children are among those who have suffered such exclusion. (2008, p. 2)

Coady goes on to say that sometimes children are not considered citizens because they lack the rationality necessary to act as full members of a self-governing society. Childhood is viewed as a “preparatory” stage. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) was considered a groundbreaking document because along with identifying children’s *human* rights to protection from violence, neglect, and exploitation, and provision of care and an adequate standard of living, it also suggested that children have *civil* rights to participation—to express their views, to be listened to, and to join a range of cultural, civic, and other activities (Hall & Rudkin, 2011). Of course, along with rights, come responsibilities, and children’s ages must be taken into account.

In the United States, conversation about children and citizenship has a long and rich history. The children’s rights movement has emphasized the rights of *protection* and *provision*, rather than *participation* for young children. From the beginning, one of the primary purposes of education in the United States has been to prepare children to participate in a democratic society. This frequently takes the form of citizenship education, especially for older children—teaching children civics and preparing them to fulfill their roles as future citizens. Early childhood educators often take a more active approach—they promote anti-bias education (e.g., designating a handicapped parking space in the parking lot), democratic classroom practices (e.g., asking children to contribute to creating classroom rules), and involving children in advocating for positive social change (e.g., writing a letter asking that a playground be repaired). We fully support all of these approaches *and*

we want to extend them beyond school grounds to children's active participation in their communities as citizens in their own right with distinctive contributions to make.

Nurturing children's relationships with their communities has numerous benefits both for the children (who engage in meaningful learning) and the adults (who come to see the world in new ways). When given the opportunity, children add a unique perspective about cultural, social, political, and moral questions to civic discourse. Making children's learning visible in projects like the how-to books gives politicians, policymakers, and members of the community a deeper understanding of the capabilities of young children and the value of high-quality early education. In the how-to book project, children were engaged as contemporary—rather than hypothetical or future—members of their communities, capable of constructing and communicating complex ideas. The project illustrates four key components of our view of children as citizens.

First, we see schools as civic institutions that contribute to a democratic society and community well-being. The civic dimension of teaching and learning should play a prominent role in education at any level. The how-to project connected the childcare centers and programs to the larger community of other children, families, educators, museum and library staff, early childhood advocates, and policymakers. In an earlier initiative, also in Providence, children created a short guide recommending places to play in the city for the mayor to distribute at a national education conference being held in Providence.³ The mayor keeps copies in his office.

Second, we draw on young children's expertise and what they can contribute to their communities, rather than an exclusive focus on what children lack (e.g., access to transportation or the need to increase reading scores). Although attention to the latter addresses key concerns, needs-based models can be usefully supplemented with a view of children as protagonists. For example, children from the Reggio Emilia preschools have contributed to the creation of a guide to the city through the eyes of the children (Municipality of Reggio Emilia, 2000), the design of a new theater curtain for a municipal theater (Vecchi, 2002), and the construction of a small amusement park for birds on the grounds of one of the preschools (Gambetti & Piazza, 1987). In Colorado, preschoolers and older children engaged in civic planning to inform a new design for the Boulder Civic Area in the city's largest downtown public space.⁴ In New York, 6 and 7-year-olds created a comprehensive design for a memorial for the children of victims of the September 11th attacks.⁵

³See http://issuu.com/r2lp/docs/places_to_play_in_pvd.

⁴See <http://www.growingupboulder.org/boulder-journey-school-research-process.html>.

⁵See http://www.pz.gse.harvard.edu/making_learning_visible.php.

Third, we encourage designing professional development initiatives around shared projects that foster the development of children's literacy and higher order thinking skills. The how-to books were a vehicle for children to develop skills in literacy and sequencing (mathematics) along with language and thoughtful communication and collaboration skills. Working on the *Places to Play* book, children learned literacy skills, the value of writing and drawing, and how to learn from and with others. Introducing the notion of "drafts" and "revision" and providing a structure for peer feedback were critical to both initiatives. Unlike handprints stamped on a sign, these experiences for children are powerful, educational and relevant.⁶

Fourth, documenting children's learning processes and products is a powerful way (a) to challenge adults' assumptions about children's capabilities, (b) to make public an alternative image of what learning looks like, and (c) to bring the voices of children into the bubble where political decision making frequently takes place. Leslie Gell, the Director of Ready to Learn Providence and a member of Rhode Island's Early Learning Council, presented an overview of the how-to project to the council membership and invited all council members to write their own books. The how-to project added elements of passion, joy, and playfulness to the countless meetings, discussions, and events that are the backdrop of policymaking. Leslie reflected on the experience, "We talk about play as being central to the lives of young children; perhaps adding 'playful elements' to advocacy is central to creating effective strategies for engagement" (L. Gell, personal communication, June 5, 2012).

Figure 6 describes one way to put these features into practice.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF CITY HALL

Just as Mayor Taveras made early literacy the cornerstone of his educational platform for Providence, an increasing number of cities are making young children's learning an explicit priority. Over 120 communities have joined in the National Campaign for Grade Level Reading to mobilize around increasing school readiness, summer learning, and school attendance in order to achieve reading proficiency for all children by the end of third grade.⁷ Fifteen of these efforts are led by mayors' offices. City leaders are passionate about giving children access to a high-quality education, yet many do not have direct control over their cities' schools and therefore may not see a vehicle for improving education. One high-impact solution to this dilemma is for

⁶For further information about the professional development components of these projects, see http://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/vop/Panel_Final_6_26_12.pdf. See Mardell and Howard (2012); see also Mardell and Carpenter (2012).

⁷See www.gradelevelreading.net.

1. *Survey the local, regional, state, and national landscapes* to identify potential classroom projects with connections to community events, needs, or aspirations (cf., Helms & Katz, 2011; Helms & Beneke, 2003).
2. *Create a compelling invitation for children to engage in such projects* (e.g., receiving a letter from the mayor identifying a need in the community).
3. *Provide professional development* that helps teachers engage children in meaningful curriculum, see themselves as advocates, and become part of something bigger than themselves.
4. *Hold a public event or create a shareable product* that makes children's learning visible to the community through selected documentation of children's learning processes and products.
5. *Facilitate children's and adults' reflections* about what they learned and the larger significance of the project and their participation in it.

FIGURE 6. Putting the idea of *children as citizens* into practice.

mayors to champion children's learning, especially early literacy, in a variety of venues.

Early education advocates should analyze how a mayor's platform aligns with a child-centered agenda and should frame their efforts using the language of the platform. Next, they should engage the city's education or child services director(s) around that agenda. Using the steps in Figure 6, they can help city leaders recognize that children's learning happens not only in the traditional K–12 public education system but also throughout cities in early learning centers, libraries, parks, museums, and other civic institutions. Making children's learning visible in these civic spaces grounds policy for policymakers who may be somewhat removed from their youngest constituents. Such real-life examples of children's capabilities complement the quantitative data about children's proficiency.

Many policymakers speak about the transformative power of youth as advocates. Providence is home to several nationally known youth leadership organizations. City leaders frequently encounter local youth sitting on panels, convening meetings, and testifying persuasively before the City Council, School Board, or General Assembly. Raising the visibility of younger children through written material, events, documentation, and face-to-face engagement with city leaders activates another potentially influential group of constituents as citizens and protagonists.

Early childhood educators understand firsthand the power of children's voices. Making children and their learning visible beyond school walls fosters informed, meaningful, and reciprocal relationships between a community and its youngest citizens.

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