

BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

HALL, E. L. & RUDKIN, J. K. *Seen & heard: Children's rights in early childhood education*. London, ON: Althouse Press. (2011). 115 pp. \$28.95 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-0-920354-72-8).

Seen & Heard reads like a conversation between two friends, both professionally and academically engaged in early childhood education (ECE). The text shifts back and forth between academic literature, professional anecdotes, examples from pop culture films, and the authors' experiences as parents. This book provides a unique contribution to the field of early childhood education, as very young children are often excluded from inquiry into children's rights (Reynaert, Bouverne-de-Bie, & Vandeveld, 2009). It is highly recommended for students in early childhood or preschool and primary college and university programs, for practicing educators and teachers, and for parents of young children.

The book is written in very accessible language and provides much fodder for discussion. Although many of the arguments seem self-evident and the perspective is very U.S.-centric, there are a number of gems hidden amongst the theoretical chapters that make it a must-read. For example, the authors discuss the tension between adult and child perspectives with regards to rights, concluding that children have the right to express opinions but not to make all decisions. They also emphasize that children need both the right to protection and the right to participation, questioning the over-emphasis in ECE on child protection, stating that overprotecting children is itself a risk, and suggesting we make "spaces for children as safe as necessary, not as safe as possible" (p. 37). Finally, they present a nuanced and enlightening discussion of the tension between the rights of individual children and communal responsibilities, with a focus on groups and children as community members.

The first chapter is an introduction to the subject of young children's rights and to the setting, the Boulder Journey School. The Boulder Journey School is a private childcare centre in Boulder, Colorado, inspired by the public preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. The highlight of this chapter is the presentation of the Boulder Journey Charter on Children's Rights, with 60 statements dictated by

children. For example, “children have a right to touch everything, but gently, but not birds because that can scare them very much” (p. 8). The following three chapters are theoretical in nature, focusing respectively on the similarity of the children’s rights movement to other human rights movements, the difference between the children’s rights movement and other rights movements, and the need to balance individual and communal rights.

The final two chapters present documentation and reflection on two projects undertaken at Boulder Journey School: a group of four-year-olds building a “hamster city,” and a group of two- and three-years-olds constructing their own “private spaces.” The first project focuses on children, teachers, and parents building a city for the classroom’s pet hamster. Throughout this project, the teachers support the children as they explore the hamster’s right to freedom and movement. The project is inspirational and moving, particularly when the hamster stops biting the children once it has more space and a city of its own, or when it escapes from its city (leading to a huge search party), only to return when a child calls its name. While the *Hamster City* chapter is without a doubt the highlight of the book, the *Private Spaces* chapter leaves readers wondering whether an investigation of children’s rights is even possible with children who are non-verbal or just learning to speak. This second project is presented much more briefly, and although the authors assert that the focus on children’s rights at the Journey School began with teachers wanting to expand a conversation they had about war with a group of four-year-olds to include pre-verbal infants and toddlers, they don’t quite succeed—focusing instead on the joy children have as they create forts. There is a discussion about children’s right to withdraw from the world, the importance of children choosing and having control over their special places, and the need for them to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct these spaces. However, no mention is made of the adventure playgrounds and playworker movement that began in the U.K. and was founded on these principles (Michaelis, 1979).

Throughout the book, the view of children and of schools that is presented and enacted is a welcome addition to the ECE literature. Children are described as socially-attuned and competent community members, and schools are prioritized as social communities more than places for individualized achievement and learning. In addition, the authors question the idea of children as future citizens, stating that “adults emphasize the importance of preparing children to participate in democracies as adults, rather than ensuring that they are part of democracies as children” (p. 53). While this perspective is not new (e.g., Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007; Lenz-Taguchi, 2010) this book is able to present these ideas without heavy theorizing, which can be inaccessible to many early childhood educators and educators-in-training.

My one major critique of the book is that the Boulder Journey School is presented as an ideal early childcare centre. The book is written by the Ex-

ecutive Director of this private school and there is no critical examination of the conditions put into place that allow such reflective work to be done with children and families, nor of conflicts that arose and were resolved; the usefulness of this work for early childhood educators or teachers of young children working in less than ideal circumstances is therefore limited. There is also a lack of discussion on differentiation between children and on how the understandings of children's rights put forth by the authors could be expanded to include children with special needs and children who don't speak the dominant language.

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