

Children's Rights in Action: Children and Adults as Partner Advocates

by Pam Boulton and Ellen Hall

World Forum Working Group on Children's Rights

This article is the third in a series of articles about children's rights, authored by members of the World Forum Working Group on Children's Rights. The first article, "A Beginning — Images of Rights: Children's Perspectives Project" (*Exchange*, March / April 2016) introduced the Images of Rights Project, providing context and background and inviting readers' participation. The second article, "Implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: Global Successes and Challenges" (*Exchange*, September /

October 2016) discussed the history of children's rights and the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), highlighting the ways in which several countries have interpreted this document. This article focuses on actions on behalf of children's rights, including the World Forum Foundation's Working Group on Children's Rights, Images of Rights, and Voices of Children projects that are currently in process in preparation for the 2017 World Forum on Early Care and Education taking place in Auckland, New Zealand on May 9–12, 2017.

perspectives on their rights (Rinaldi, 2001). But we must do more than merely listen and take note. We must partner with children in advocating for children's rights worldwide, speaking and acting not only FOR children but also WITH children. Through this process, we can learn a great deal about ourselves, about one another, and about the world through the eyes of the child (Gopnik, 2009).

In an effort to give visibility to the many actions that are taking place with and for children, we asked World Forum colleagues to share brief stories on children's rights actions from their perspectives. The replies to our request follow.

International Stories of Children's Rights in Action

Norway: Lita Haddal

It's the height of rush hour in a busy shopping mall in Norway. A father walks slowly behind a toddler dragging a shopping bag along the floor. Other shoppers are blocked by the youngster's progress but patiently wait for him to negotiate his journey. Finally arriving at the exit, he looks up at his dad and smiles triumphantly. Dad picks him up and the delayed shoppers matter-



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learning and on children's rights, with an emphasis on children's right to participation.

As written in the UNCRC, children have inherent rights as members of the human family. From the moment of birth, children, as curious and competent learners (Malaguzzi, 1993), are engaged in explorations of the physical and relational world and the ways in which they fit into this world (Rinaldi, 2006). As part of their investigations, children come to understand their rights, when they are valued, when things seem fair and just, and when they are not honored. Their understanding is evidenced through a variety of languages, including verbal language, gestures, cries, smiles, movement, drawing, painting, sculpting, photography, and manipulation of blocks and natural materials (Hall & Rudkin, 2011). Adults have a responsibility to listen carefully to children's

of-factly surge past them without commenting.

At a child care center, juice and cookies rest on the candlelit coffee table in the staff room. A four-year-old child is having a heart-to-heart talk with her teacher about her customer satisfaction with her child care day. She tells her that she would like to sit next to Haakon. And she likes to paint. Her comments are noted and placed in the planning book for the next staff meeting along with those of the other children surveyed for their opinions.

Why are these scenes in Norway evidence of children's rights in effect? Twenty-six years after Norway ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and 14 years after it was incorporated into Norwegian law, these are everyday scenes of principles applied in practice. In a country where spanking has long been outlawed, children's rights are both overriding guidelines for civic action and criteria for quality in child care curriculum. Through the National Curriculum Framework for Child Care Institutions, all child care centers, which are attended by 96% of the country's three- to five-year-olds, are mandated to apply children's rights to practice.

Norway has a history of honoring its children. The national holiday has been celebrated by a children's parade as its main feature since 1873. Flag-waving school children march through towns all over Norway on May 17, personifying the freedom Norway is so proud of. In 1981, a children's spokesman and watchdog in the form of a Children's Ombudsman was appointed. By using this existing office to oversee it, the implementation of the CRC into law was eased. This office investigates complaints, monitors progress, and promotes the ongoing integration of children's rights in an increasingly pluralistic Norwegian society. Today,

children are encouraged to contact the Ombudsman directly for help when they feel threatened and unfairly treated.

Uganda: Hilda Nankunda

As a signatory to the UNCRC 1989, Uganda integrated children's rights into the Constitution of Uganda and laws. Several child sensitive policies have been developed to guide interventions into the situation of observing children's rights. Uganda has made progress, and some children enjoy their human rights. There has been an increase in the number of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers in Uganda, even in some rural areas. These are established by individuals and the private sector, encouraged by government. The National Integrated ECD policy encourages more investment in ECD. The quality of learning and facilities for stimulation vary across the country, with the rural having very poor or no facilities due to prohibitive costs.

Particularly in rural areas, schools do not have basics like football and netball, the most popular games. I recently bought two balls for boys and two for girls for a school where I completed primary education, as a token in recognition of the school's contribution to my life. I was touched when the headmaster and parents expressed much gratitude for mere balls. I asked one of the parents whether they could not afford footballs. The response was that such things cannot be accommodated within the school budget, which is very limited. Government and civil society organizations must be intentional to support communities to promote protection of children's rights by committing adequate resources to relevant services.

United States: Ellen Hall

During the spring semester, graduate students enrolled in the Boulder Journey School Teacher Education Program took

a course titled, "Community, Advocacy, and Leadership." Students were asked to step out of their comfort zones into the community, and as advocates and leaders, envision, design, and create projects that would impact the future of learning.

One group of graduate students was interested in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and how policy can support a celebration of the rights of children. Through their research, the group unearthed an interesting but little known fact: In 2001, a joint resolution by the Colorado Legislature established the first Wednesday in March as Colorado Children's Day, a day to celebrate the spirit of children.

In preparation for this event, graduate students facilitated discussions with children about how they could and should be celebrated. The children suggested making signs and stickers to mark the day. On Children's Day, graduate students organized a display with signs and stickers that read, "Future Voter, Current Citizen. Happy Colorado Children's Day, March 2, 2016" and offered them to the children.

Teachers and children led a parade down Pearl Street, the pedestrian mall in the center of town. The children brought their signs and stickers and offered the stickers to citizens. One family shared their eight-year-old child's perspective: "I've always wondered why we celebrate moms and dads with special days, but not kids. This is so great! But it's not even on calendars. How do we make people know? How can we make it a bigger deal?"

The group of graduate students wondered the same thing, and they acted. Hoping to strengthen future Colorado Children's Day initiatives, the group contacted Boulder's City Manager and City Council. Together, they drafted a "Declaration of Support" for the adoption of a "Boulder Children's Day" on

the same day as Colorado Children's Day. Mayor Suzanne Jones signed the declaration in late May, legally establishing Boulder Children's Day as the first Wednesday in March.

In order to make the public aware, the group released a video, "What is Children's Day," which was created by children and graduate students (<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=2b1W98yHZU0>).

Bhutan: Karma Gayleg

The constitution of Bhutan guarantees the right of every child to develop to his/her full potential. Access to early childhood care and development programmes is a holistic approach to development, as well as promoting the rights of children to socialization, language, expression, arts and play, amongst many others.

As access to early childhood education for children aged three to five increases, and more children have opportunities to participate in the early childhood programmes, children demonstrate improved outcomes in socioemotional development in terms of being able to engage socially and manage emotions better. Children also demonstrate improved language and communication abilities, which lead to improved language use and interactions. This enables children to exercise their rights to communication and interaction.

Access to early learning opportunities through enrollment in the early childhood centres also serves to promote children's right to play and artistic expression. Learning through activities and interaction with others provides children the opportunity to engage in play and learn as they play. Art is an important form of expression that young children use to express their emotions and thoughts. As children engage more in arts activities, they learn to express

their feelings and ideas freely, which cannot be expressed better in any other mode of expression, such as writing and spoken language.

Canada: Margo Greenwood and Landon Pearson

Canada, having ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, has undertaken many activities that support the inclusion of young people in initiatives that impact their lives. "Shaking the Movers" represents a decade of work, anchored in Article 12 of the UNCRC. The right of children and young people under the age of 18 to participate in decisions that directly affect them and the responsibility of the rest of us to take what they have to say seriously is a cross-cutting principle of the UNCRC. In settings that are safe and congenial, children and youth come together to 'shake up' the 'movers' in society, who can make a difference on their behalf.

They have talked about child rights in education, belonging and identity, the rights of young people with mental health issues, challenges related to young peoples' rights in the youth justice system, the right to play and to artistic expression, the civil and political rights of under-18s, the right to be free from exploitation and the role of the media. Most recently they have discussed children's rights and climate change, essentially their right to a future.

The ideas, comments, and suggestions that are put forward by the young people in sessions that are free from adult interference are captured by recorders and taken forward into venues where they will inspire action. One of these venues is the Child Rights Academic Network, which comprises nearly 60 professors and graduate students committed to children's rights from across Canada as well as the

United Kingdom and the United States. CRAN meets once a year in Ottawa to respond to what the young people have just had to say. They then spread the young peoples' ideas among their own students, as well as build alliances with their colleagues to work together on promoting them. Reports from "Shaking the Movers" are also taken to government officials and, increasingly, to legislators at municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Civil society organizations related to children, youth, and families are targeted, as well as professional organizations, in order to amplify the children's voices and bring about positive change. Young voices also find their way into the widely distributed online academic journal, *Canadian Journal of Children's Rights*.

The First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada (<https://fncaringociety.com>) employs a reconciliation framework to support the empowerment of First Nations children, youth, and families by providing them with high-quality resources. With the understanding that young people have the right to know Canada's history of colonization, meaningful reconciliation initiatives directly engage young people in realizing cultural equity. Some examples of specific reconciliation initiatives that directly engage children and youth in the classroom and community are: Honouring Memories, Planting Dreams; Have a Heart Day; and Our Dreams Matter, Too (Child and Family Caring Society).

The First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada has also developed resources to support First Nations children and youth such as the Indigenous Kids Rights Path, an online resource that provides help for young people to find key resources if they feel their rights have

been violated. The Society has developed Guidelines for the Ethical Engagement of Young People as a tool to assist organizations with the engagement of First Nations young people. These Guidelines focus on organizational structures, culture, and fiscal capacity.

World Forum Foundation's Working Group on Children's Rights Projects

Voices of Children

<https://projects.worldforumfoundation.org/voices-of-children/>

Beginning in 2012, members of the World Forum Foundation's Working Group on Children's Rights have been creating a documentary titled, "Voices of Children." The documentary seeks to expand on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child by advocating for a more inclusive view of children's rights from the perspectives of the children themselves. The international Voices of Children team, composed of educators, social scientists, and filmmakers has traveled in Brazil, India, Singapore, United States, and Kenya, working with educators and advocates. The team has also worked virtually with educators, several of whom have contributed video from their contexts.

Images of Rights

<https://projects.worldforumfoundation.org/images-of-rights/>

Members of the Images of Rights project team propose that while the Convention gives direction at the national level, rights are experienced one child at a time. Whether children can verbally express their rights or not, they experience them in their everyday lives. For children, these experiences are elemental — the fabric of their lives. They are not the political, debated processes of adults. For children, provision, protection, and participation mean feeling safe and having food to eat when

they are hungry, a sense of place, and others with whom to share thoughts, ideas, and the daily tasks and joys of living. Children know when these are present and also when they are lacking, insecure, and/or hurtful. We can see the expressions of their understandings of their fundamental rights through the images they create and the stories they tell. The Images of Rights project seeks to collect a gallery of these images and stories to give visibility to children's knowledge of their rights.

As these projects have unfolded, the Voices of Children and Images of Rights teams have realized the enormous impact their work is having on children and adults throughout the world. The processes of making the documentary and of gathering images of art in various media have empowered children to express their thoughts about their world and inspired in adults a new understanding of how and why we must listen to and honor children's ideas. Following are reflections on the projects by colleagues.

United States: Carol Butchart, Carmen Simpson, and Amy Zippel

As early childhood teachers, we participated in the Images of Rights: Children's Perspectives Project, and we learned that we have the responsibility to recognize children's rights and the amazing opportunity to affirm children. As we work with children and hear their stories, we develop a deeper understanding of their view of the world. Children show us their images and tell us their stories, and now, using the lens of provision, protection, and participation, we see that they understand their rights. Children are offered the place and time for revisiting and reflecting on their work. We invite children to include other children and teachers as partners in their reflections. As teachers, we acknowledge and support the study of the events of their lives. Documentation of children's

work informs our practice and gives us the information and ability to validate the children's experiences. This also provides us with the language to inform others. We are advocates with children and for children by telling their stories and confirming their rights to families, schools, and communities.

United States: Kirsten Haugen

Over the past few years, dedicated members of our World Forum Foundation's Working Group on Children's Rights have developed two projects to reflect on and promote our understanding of children's rights from the perspectives of children themselves. In doing so, our thoughtful colleagues have challenged and elevated my understanding of children's rights in ways that daily impact how I read the news, view images of children, consider the impact of governmental and educational policies, and observe, talk with, and talk about the children in my life.

What makes these projects unique is the profound value they place on truly listening to the children themselves, reflecting upon and considering varied cultural, linguistic, and developmental circumstances and potential biases in doing so. By focusing on the three core tenets of the UNCRC — provision, protection, and participation — these projects move beyond explicitly asking children about their rights to spending quality time with children in different countries, communities, and contexts and truly tuning in to how each child expresses personal experiences of feeling cared for, protected, and capable in his or her own life.

These projects provoke us as adults to ask, "What is our role in understanding and promoting children's rights?" When we advocate for children, do the words, images, and stories we choose truly respect and involve the children we intend to care for and protect? More

importantly, do our children feel safe, cared for, valued, and heard? And what do we do when this is not the case?

What, indeed, are children's rights in a world where too many children go hungry, are forced to flee their homes in the face of violence, forego necessary health care due to excessive costs, or have difficulty accessing an education?

Often when people talk about the UNCRC, they think policy. I am thrilled by how these two projects have turned that upside down and put the opportunity and responsibility to understand, promote, and protect children's rights within your reach and mine. They've extended to each of us a powerful invitation to be a part of it, by taking up the day-to-day challenge and opportunity to reflect on how we interact with and listen to children in our lives, and how we talk about children in conversation or in writing, and the images we choose to represent children.

We invite you to take some time to get to know these two projects. Watch for the Voices of Children documentary at the 2017 World Forum on Early Care and Education. In the meantime, view the reports and video already posted at <https://projects.worldforumfoundation.org/voices-of-children/>. Explore the artwork submitted to the Images of Rights Gallery. Reflect on what children in your own life are saying about their rights to provision, protection, and participation through the art they spontaneously create and the stories they tell. Then share the art and stories with us at <https://projects.worldforumfoundation.org/images-of-rights/>.

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"What is Children's Day":
[https://m.youtube.com/
watch?v=2b1W98yHZU0](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=2b1W98yHZU0)

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Organizations that Work on Behalf of Children's Rights

compiled by Edna Ranck

Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) • www.acei.org

Yvette Murphy, Director, Global Advocacy

Mission: "Promoting innovative solutions to education challenges and inspiring action that creates positive sustainable futures for children and youth worldwide. ACEI does not expect any government activity relating to the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) during the new administration. However, ACEI intends to continue a series of activities:

- to promote child rights principles in the United States.
- to connect the CRC to existing U.S. laws and practices that protect children's individual rights.
- to exchange work efforts on this issue among coalition members.
- to expand coalition membership."

Articles on the UNCRC occasionally appear in ACEI's journal *Childhood Education*.

World Organization for Early Childhood Education (World OMEP) • www.worldomep.org

Dr. Judith Wagner, World OMEP Deputy President & North American Regional Vice-President

The Preamble of the World OMEP Constitution states: "The Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Prescolaire (OMEP) is an international non-governmental and non-profit-making organisation dedicated to all aspects of early childhood education and care (ECEC). OMEP, founded in 1948 in Prague, was established in order to advance the interests and overall well-being of children in all parts of the world... regardless of race, sex, religion, or national or social origin. It is empowered by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of November 20, 1989. It is specifically aimed at advancing childhood education and care in accordance with Articles 28–30 of the UNCRC.

"OMEP uses children's rights as a frame for its declarations and position papers, as well as for projects with UNESCO, such as Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) and Education for Sustainable Development. OMEP offers support for refugee children and children in crisis with the UN NGO Committee on Migration and the 2016 Play and Resilience Project. OMEP's annual conferences and regional meetings include sessions on the rights guaranteed to children in the CRC."

Campaign for the U.S. Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child • www.childrightscampaign.org

John Surr, Secretary

"We envision a nation and world where all children, regardless of race, class, age, nationality, religion, or ability can be guaranteed life, health, safety, education, development, and freedom from discrimination... ; and where children are prepared to meaningfully participate in a democratic society and are free to offer their talents in the service of humanity. Our mission is to bring about ratification and implementation of the CRC in the United States. We will achieve this through mobilizing our diverse network to educate communities on the Convention, thereby creating a groundswell of national support for the treaty, and advocating directly without government on behalf of ratification."

Save the Children (STC) • www.savethechildren.org

Carolyn Miles, President & CEO

"Our vision is a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development, and participation. Our mission is to inspire breakthroughs in the way the world treats children, and to achieve immediate and lasting change in their lives. Our values guide our behavior and are the principles by which we make decisions: Accountability, Collaboration, Integrity, Ambition, and Creativity.

"Save the Children was begun and heavily influenced by Eglantyne Jebb, an English woman who wrote the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations in 1924, which in turn inspired the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child."

The World Bank Group (WBG) • www.wbg.org

Jim Yong Kim, President

"Investing in the early years is one of the smartest investments a country can make to break the cycle of poverty, address inequality, and boost productivity later in life. Today, millions of young children are not reaching their full potential because of inadequate nutrition, lack of early stimulation and learning, and exposure to stress. Investments in the physical, mental, and emotional development of children — from before birth until they enter primary school — are critical for the future productivity of individuals for the economic competitiveness of nations." From "Human Capital Summit: Investing in the Early Years for Growth and Productivity," October 6, 2016."

Retrieved: www.worldbank.org/human-capital-summit?cid=ECR_E_NewsletterWeekly_EN_EXT

"A booklet titled *Snapshot: Investing in The Early Years for Growth and Productivity* was distributed at the recent opening reception of the exhibition 'The Early Years: Investing in Our World's Future' at The World Bank Group Headquarters. Posters among the photographs of day-old infants cited the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The booklet states on the first page: 'Early childhood experiences have a profound impact on brain development — affecting learning, health, behavior and ultimately, income.... Those who lack these skills will be left further behind.'"