Places to Play in Providence
Valuing Preschool Children as Citizens

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In June 2011 Providence Mayor Angel Taveras welcomed participants to NAEYC’s National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development with a book written specially for them, Places to Play in Providence (http://issuu.com/r2lp/docs/places_to_play_in_pvd). The next day some of the book’s authors, 3- and 4-year-olds from area early childhood programs, visited the Institute and received a standing ovation for their work. More than a year after the book’s debut, the mayor still keeps copies in his office and hands them out to Providence, Rhode Island, visitors.

Subtitled A Guide to the City by Our Youngest Citizens, the book features children’s comments and drawings about Providence in an area they have particular expertise in—play. The cover, drawn by 4-year-old Christian, depicts how “the sun shines through the whole city,” and includes key landmarks such as the State House, the Amtrak Acela train, and WaterFire (the city’s signature public event, when 100 bonfires are lit just above the surface of the three rivers that meet in the city’s downtown).

The book begins with Jonathan explaining, “Me gusta jugar fútbol en mi casa con mis hermanos” (I like to play soccer at my home with my brothers). Stanley’s page is next. He explains, “My mom takes me to school to play.” Later in the book, Paola tells of Lippit Memorial Park (on Blackstone Boulevard), where “you could bring chalk and play with it. You could bring your toys from home and play with them. You can make new friends.” Pascal’s contribution about Waterplace Park begins, “This is a dream. That is me at the top of the hill and these are the steps to climb.”

In the Places to Play in Providence project, teachers treat children as citizens—not as hypothetical or future citizens, but as contemporary members of their community. They see children as capable of constructing and communicating complex ideas, adding their unique and valuable perspectives.
From Jonathan, Paola, Pascal, and Stanley, we learn that Providence is a city where more than one language is spoken. It is a friendly city, where you can use your imagination and where children are encouraged to play. Children and their ideas are taken seriously, and they become ambassadors for their community. Children’s relationships with their community are acknowledged and nurtured, benefiting both children (who are engaged in meaningful learning) and adults (who come to see the world in new ways).

The Making Learning Visible/Ready to Learn Providence network

Making Learning Visible (MLV), a research group based at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Ready to Learn Providence (R2LP), a community-based school readiness initiative, began cofacilitating a teacher–researcher peer network in April 2011. A grant from the Rhode Island Association for the Education of Young Children (RAEYC) and Bright Stars (Rhode Island’s quality rating and improvement system) supported the network. Through six whole-group sessions, two facilitator site visits, and two peer visits, MLV and R2LP helped 16 educators (center-based teachers and family child care providers) collaborate to improve their teaching. (For a description of the peer network’s work, see Mardell & Carpenter [2012] and Mardell & Howard [2012].)

At the first network session the facilitators put the idea of children as citizens into action. In order to support children’s literacy and creativity, increase their understanding of group learning, and raise the visibility of children in the community, they asked teachers to participate in the Places to Play in Providence project. The teachers returned to their classrooms and told children that 2,000 teachers were coming to their city. The teachers explained that these educators might not have visited Providence before, so to help them feel welcome, children could make a book about places to play in the city.

Engaging children in talking about and making drawings of their favorite places to play catalyzed deep, meaningful investigations. Teachers facilitated children’s thinking by asking, “What is play?” and “Where do you (we) play?” They asked families to send in photos of their children’s favorite places to play and held classroom discussions about the best places to play. Teachers modeled the process of drawing first drafts and gathering feedback to improve work. They then supported the children, who offered and considered peer feedback to improve their drawings.

Impact on the classroom

The children participating in the Places to Play in Providence project were intrigued and excited by the idea that so many teachers were going to visit their city, and their interest in preparing for the visiting educators was sustained for months. In fact, the impetus for the children’s trip to the Institute was a child’s question posed weeks after the book had been completed and submitted: “When are the 2,000 teachers coming?” This inquiry prompted the teachers’ realization that a trip downtown to the Institute was in order.

The project was not ordinary curriculum for the teachers either. The practice of young children giving and receiving peer feedback was new to most network participants. While learning from and with members of one’s community in order to solve problems (often through feedback) is an essential part of democratic citizenship, it is not a regular feature of early childhood classrooms. However, it is a practice the teachers have come to value. Reflecting on the project, participating teacher Victoria Bothelho explains, “I was surprised by the children’s ability to listen to feedback from other children and to make decisions about whether they would ‘take it or leave it.’ It changed my ways of thinking about children’s abilities.” Teacher Deepani Ambalangodage adds, “The way the children could work at improving their drawings step by step and use so much language to talk about it—we didn’t know they were capable of that.”

The project also raised questions and concerns. Engaging children in a project with such a high-stakes product created tensions. Teachers felt strongly that even though the advocacy goals of the project were in the children’s best interest, children should not be used as props or window dressing in the effort to welcome Institute attendees. Seeing children as citizens meant they deserved to have a voice and choices in this endeavor. The children chose to participate in the project and they chose what to say to the 2,000 teachers about their city. It is not uncommon for children in early childhood programs to be asked to engage in community or advocacy activities; seeing children as citizens gives teachers an ethical framework to guide children’s involvement.

Advocacy

Advocates for early childhood education must move forward on many fronts. Increasing the visibility of good early childhood education is an essential step toward informing the public about the benefits of educating the youngest members of the community.
By making children and their learning visible, *Places to Play in Providence* enhanced the relationship of the early childhood community with important decision makers and informed conversations with community members.

In his welcome to NAEYC members, Mayor Taveras described his own educational journey from Head Start to Harvard. He then held up the book, invited teachers who were part of the project to come forward, and jumped down from the podium to pose for a photo with them. Returning to the lectern, he remarked, “I’ve been mayor for five months and I’ve learned I have to take credit for anything good.” (Mayor Taveras’s speech is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww3QBKzAnKw&feature=related.)

The mayor’s quip is telling. It is always important to help politicians support early childhood education. Already a longtime ally of early childhood education, the mayor’s support has only increased since the publication of *Places to Play in Providence*.

While advocates can talk about young children’s abilities and the importance of quality early education programs, the impact of words alone is often limited. The *Places to Play* book opens up opportunities for meaningful conversations with community members. A colleague’s chance encounter with a local artist illustrates the impact the book can have. As our colleague sat in a café, an artist noticed the cover and asked to take a look at the book. As she turned the pages, she was struck by the sophistication of the children’s words and drawings. Our colleague was then able to explain that young children are capable of having and communicating sophisticated ideas, and that well-trained, thoughtful teachers are essential in helping children actualize their full potential.

Conversations like this took place and continue to occur across Providence. Advocates for quality early education—teachers, administrators, and others—with book in hand, explain to parents and policy makers how much children learned by taking part in this project.

The book’s influence extends far beyond Providence. With more than 2,600 views online, educators from Louisiana, Ohio, Oregon, Japan, and Hong Kong have expressed interest in replicating efforts to engage children as citizens in their communities.

**A vision of young children as citizens**

What does it mean for a city or a state or even a country to embrace its young children as citizens? It involves developing approaches to encourage children’s participation in civic life so that their ideas can be seen and heard, and it involves changing the perceptions and priorities of adults to embrace the rights of children as citizens.

This is no small endeavor, but Providence has made a start. Young children know about play, so they are qualified to be called experts. They are—for a moment—contributors to and stakeholders in their community. In opportunities facilitated by early childhood educators, children and adults engage in dialogue about what is important to them. They are all citizens discussing the present and future of their community.

**References**


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