

Preschoolers as City Planners

A Story of Civic Engagement from Boulder, Colorado

by Lauren Shaffer, Ashley Bauer, and Ellen Hall



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Colorado Denver. As Community Specialist, she works with classrooms to bring the larger community into the life of the school, and seeks ways to offer children's voices to the larger community. Through this work, she is an advocate for the capability of young children to participate in their communities as citizens. She believes that children have the right to competent adults who understand and honor their ideas, and that adults have a right to live in a world where children are present and valued.



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University of Colorado Denver with an M.A. in Educational Psychology. She has taught prekindergarten, preschool, and toddler-aged children. She is currently spending her third year in Room 12 with a class of prekindergarten children, their families, and her co-teacher, Jacie, who is a current student in the Boulder Journey School Teacher Education Program. She has been hugely inspired by the strong community built within this class and is proud to share their voices with a larger audience.



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The November air was crisp, and the children's excitement was palpable. Seven four year olds, two teachers, and two parents were playing a game. Each child took a turn leading the group anywhere they wanted within a large public space in downtown Boulder, Colorado. The children had completed an exploration of a turtle sculpture outside the Boulder Public Library. They had also visited a playground, a bridge, a creek bank filled with ducks, and the city Municipal Building. The children anxiously began to follow their new leader, Finn, wondering where he would stop. Suddenly, he picked up a stick and crouched down on a wide dirt path. "I want to stop here," he exclaimed, "and do some drawing." The children searched for their own sticks and began to draw shapes and write their names in the dirt. "Remarkable," the adults commented to each other. After such a lovely journey, the children ended, deciding to leave their marks on the space.



THE CHILDREN MADE THEIR MARKS IN THE DIRT, WHILE THEIR TEACHER, ASHLEY AND WYATT'S MOTHER, ANNA DOCUMENTED. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

This was the first in a series of field trips we took to explore the Boulder Civic Area with a class of prekindergarten children, and subsequent experiences only proved to deepen their appreciation for the richness of this neighborhood.

Rights Permeate a School Community

Boulder Journey School is a place of discourse. We educate through the examination of ideas. All members of our school community are invited to engage in conversation, including: children, ages six weeks to six years; families of those children; teachers; graduate student interns working on obtaining their master's degrees and Colorado Teaching Certificates through the Boulder Journey School Teacher Education Program; and visitors to our school through the Boulder Journey School Study Tour Program. We also invite community members, other local schools, neighbors, and local politicians into our conversations. We believe that the strongest learning opportunities are created through dialogues among diverse voices, and conversations about rights are some of the most pervasive in the school. That is why when we learned about a new dialogue initiated by the City of Boulder regarding citizen participation in city planning, our interest was immediately piqued.

Rights of Citizens to Participate in Civic Planning

Boulder, Colorado, is a small city in central Colorado, of 102,000 residents, situated about 5,430 feet above sea level. It is known for the strong value it places on citizen participation in government and city planning endeavors (Rubino, 2013). Initiated by the City Council in Spring 2012, the Boulder Civic Area

project goal is to redesign a several block expanse of downtown Boulder into the city's "social, civic, and environmental heart" (Inspire Boulder, n.d.). In addition to reducing flood risk in this area, Boulder intends to honor its historical and cultural import, while giving the space new life (Meltzer, 2013).

In summer 2012, we learned about the city's goal: "Community collaboration to help establish a vision for what the area could become" (City of Boulder, 2013). We guessed that most collaborators would likely be adults, and wondered what it would look like if young children were involved. Our belief in children as "citizens not only of the future but also of the present; beneficiaries, as well as authors of the life experiences of the city" (Davoli & Ferri, 2000, p. 10) helped move our thinking forward.

Rights of Young Children to Become Involved in Traditionally Adult Conversations

As we investigated possibilities, we quickly found that some important colleagues were also wondering what it would look like if young people were involved in city planning. Growing Up Boulder is a "child and youth-friendly city" initiative that supports youth's social and political involvement in the goings-on of their city (Growing Up Boulder, 2013). We discovered its plans to include Boulder's youth in the Civic Area project and quickly joined in their efforts, along with teachers and students from two area high schools, a middle school, and the Boulder County "I Have A Dream" Foundation.

In many ways we took a huge risk by engaging in this project. We had to trust that if we began this process, it would yield remarkable results. We believe that "each community member, regardless of age, has a right (and a responsibility)

to express her or his perspective" (Hall & Rudkin, 2011, p. 51). We were confident that the possibilities existing within the provocation of designing public spaces would compel at least some of the children in some way; this seemed too important an opportunity to let pass.

Rights of Families to Participate in Their Child's Education

We decided to start small and invite one classroom from Boulder Journey School to engage in depth, realizing that the project could expand in the future. The strong family community in one of our pre-kindergarten classrooms, Room 12, inspired us. We felt that this classroom would be a great fit for the project because they were a tight-knit social community already. We know how important parent perspectives and attitudes can be to the development of children's perspectives about spaces (Chawla, 2013). We wanted to offer this group an opportunity to engage in their children's education in a new way, and to bring them together around a common goal.

We also decided to begin slowly, introducing the project to parents in many different ways and encouraging individuals to connect in their own manner. First, we held an informal family picnic in the Civic Area, which was attended by a majority of the families. We spoke briefly about the upcoming project and offered the children paper for drawing their surroundings if they were inspired to do this. We observed the ways in which the children and families interacted with the space in order to gain clues about how to move forward.

Following the picnic, we kept families informed about what was happening by creating daily journals to inform and engage: emailing PDFs and movies explaining the children's experiences each day. Our hope was that the information would extend conversations between

children and parents and also provoke families to participate on a deeper level.

We held a meeting to gain input from families:

- Teachers presented the city's timeline for the project.
- Parents and teachers brainstormed ideas to make the space more engaging.
- Teachers suggested ways for families to participate according to their strengths, interests, and availability.

In this way, we incorporated individual expertise into our classroom work, while never making anyone feel as though they either had to or couldn't participate:

- Many parents volunteered to help chaperone field trips to the Civic Area.
- Other families analyzed children's work to post on the city's website.
- Many families engaged in individual conversations with us around the children's ideas and the city's plans. The ideas that came from parents helped push our thinking:

CYRENA AND TEJA DISCUSSED WHAT THEY RECOGNIZED ABOUT STOCK PHOTOS OF THE BOULDER CIVIC AREA FOUND ON THE CITY OF BOULDER WEBSITE. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS



- One parent, with a background in education, volunteered to chaperone every field trip as an observer to help us document the project.

- Another parent, with a background in environmental design, offered to meet with us periodically to help format and present the children's ideas professionally.
- Yet another parent suggested that we share information about the project in an online forum to begin a dialogue with other schools and cities engaged in similar projects. This suggestion boosted our confidence when we were offered a section of the Growing Up Boulder webpage on which to add documentation.

Rights of Children to Time and Space to Deeply Explore all Aspects of a Project

We introduced the project to the children in several different ways, allowing the opportunity for individuals to connect with it in their own fashion. We offered the children photos of the family picnic, along with stock photos of different areas of the space, including: play spaces, sidewalks, green spaces, Boulder Bandshell, Boulder Creek, Boulder Public Library, and more. These photographs helped spark the children's memories and helped us understand their familiarity with the area.

Upon examining a photo of Boulder Creek, Lily commented, "Hey, I have been to that river! I let my dog go in. She's pretty crazy in the water. She tries to go in the deep water!"

Madelyn recognized a seemingly nondescript photo of a green space, commenting, "That place is too far away to walk to the Farmer's Market!"

THE CHILDREN ACTED OUT SCENES FROM "THE NUTCRACKER" IN THE BOULDER BANDSHELL DURING A FIELD TRIP. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS



In order to build group familiarity with the space, we planned a series of field trips to the Boulder Civic Area. We created small groups for exploration (two teachers, five to eight children, and three parents). While on the trips, we explained the city's goals to change the Boulder Civic Area and desire for input from people who live in Boulder.

After the trip, Noah shared, "My favorite part was being at that City Council work office. I liked going up and down the stairs. I think I want them to make a jungle gym."

"To support children in their processes requires listening to their many languages" (Hall & Rudkin, 2011, p. 66). To honor the children's right to encounter the space in ways that resonated for them, we played the leader game. While the children played, we took notes and photos. Wyatt's mother, Anna, who accompanied us on all the field trips reflected:

"The children delighted in exploring the space in a very physical way. They jumped from stairs, climbed on rocks, balanced on ledges, and ran along paths. Any objects they encountered along the way become tools for exploration. I'd love to see more spaces explicitly created for children for that kind of active play in the Civic Area. I see the potential for a space that is engaging, inviting, and alive."

After the field trips, we shared the photographs and observations with the children. They used different media/languages to elaborate on their experiences, verbally and graphically. During one experience we asked the children to draw their suggestions directly on photographs of the Civic Area.

Lillia imagined a new play space: "A slide that goes over water, a pretend crocodile you can climb on. A statue of a nice monster, a play motorcycle kids can ride on."

Wyatt reflected: "I want it to be fun to play on things for kids. They

should have jumping. They should have a train for the tracks."

Cyrena added: "I would like to see painting, art, and beautiful colors and decorations."

Rights of Children to Have Their Ideas Valued and Utilized

On December 5, 2012, the City of Boulder held a public open house, and invited us to share our work alongside other youth groups and city officials. With the help of parents, who offered expertise in the areas of city planning, advertising, and education, we sifted through the

mountain of documentation. We identified five key themes in the children's work, which we represented in a short looping slideshow containing drawings, quotes, and photos from the children and families' experiences:

1. **Revive:** There should be updated play spaces.
2. **Engage:** There should be places for physical

activity, like running, climbing, jumping, and playing games.

3. **Honor:** The space should recognize Boulder Creek as a central feature and add more opportunities to learn about it and engage with it.
4. **Preserve:** The space should remain a strong ecosystem for animal and plant life.
5. **Imagine:** There should be opportunities for everyone who visits the space to encounter, make, and engage with art, especially children and workers.

Our group of children watched the slideshow of their work at the open house alongside their families, city officials, interested citizens, and other groups of young presenters. Among the feedback offered by many attendees, one graduate design student told us that most city planners are over-taught, and that children's ideas offer a fresh, honest look at how a space is currently used and could be used in the future. We think this entire experience helped to exemplify the significance of the project into which the children had invested so much energy.



HENRY, LILY, AND LILIA INVESTIGATED A DRAGON STATUE OUTSIDE THE BOULDER PUBLIC LIBRARY WITH HENRY'S PARENTS, DONNA AND BRAD. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS



CYRENA ADDED EMBELLISHMENTS TO A PHOTO OF THE OUTSIDE OF THE BOULDER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, STATING: "I WOULD LIKE TO SEE PAINTING ART, AND BEAUTIFUL COLORS, AND DECORATIONS." PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS



SAMMY AND LELAH DREW THEIR IDEAS FOR THE BOULDER CIVIC AREA ONTO PRINTED PHOTOS. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

Rights of a Community to Benefit from Children's Perspectives

In December 2012, city planners synthesized all of the ideas and perspectives they had gathered from the public, and opened a competition to design and planning professionals. Professionals from across the United States submitted more than 40 designs to this competition (Rubino, 2013), after which the city again entered into a public comment phase. Citizens had the month of January 2013 to review and critique the work of several finalists.

Participation in projects such as this one have been shown to result in multiple and varied benefits for young people's education and development. Perhaps more importantly, however, are the benefits to a community that is developed with children and their perspectives in mind (Chawla, 1994; Derr, 2012; Francis, 2002; Frank, 2006; Horelli, 1998).

When we reviewed the designs, we were surprised and delighted to see many of the children and families' ideas incorporated. We reviewed a handful of the Civic Area finalist designs with the children and documented their opinions. For example:

- "Cultivate, Educate, Celebrate" caught the children's attention because it featured places to interact with Boulder Creek, community gardens, public art opportunities, and more diverse play spaces.
- "Sunday in the Park" intrigued the children with its historic caboose and a future streetcar. They also liked the idea of a new outdoor theater. Wyatt said, "I want a theater to be there. Will that theater be for kids?"

We submitted all of the children's thoughts to the competition jury where they were considered alongside other citizens' opinions. When the jury pro-

cess ended, the two designs mentioned above had won (Meltzer, 2013). We were excited, and shared our pride in the news with the children. The smiles on their faces told us they understood that they had made a difference.

Throughout the project, we listened to the children's comments: "The people who work in the Municipal Building want to know our ideas"; "They want to change the Boulder Civic Area and want kids to say how." And Wyatt said, "I want a park that has kid-size computers, and you can change the ideas of what you want to do." We would like to imagine that park as well, and think these statements sum up the children's profound understanding that young people do have a right to opinions about the development of public spaces.

Looking Forward

This is not the end of the story. Boulder City Planners will continue to tweak the designs and offer them back to citizens for comment before adopting a final plan in August 2013. After the excitement of the open house and design competition, we knew that it would be a disservice to the children to end our investigation of the Civic Area and wait for the five-year plan to unfold. So we formulated three new questions with the children and their families, and look forward to the possibilities to come:

1. Can we create the Boulder Civic Area in our classroom, along with the children, to continue the exploration?
2. Can we find a way to make some of the children's concrete ideas for the Boulder Civic Area materialize in the space before they move on to Kindergarten?
3. Can we expand this project to include other classrooms at Boulder Journey School and other early childhood programs in the area?

When we reflect on our trepidations at the beginning of this project, we realize how worthwhile it was for us to take such a huge risk. We initially worried about the possible lack of public enthusiasm for the children's ideas, the possibility of not being able to meet the city's deadlines, the possibility of not being able to share the children's ideas in an effective way, and the possibility of letting the children and their families down, not to mention Growing Up Boulder and city officials. No matter how much you believe in the capabilities of children, and no matter how competent a teacher you are, commitment to a public project such as this one always feels risky.



JOSH'S REPRESENTATION OF THE BOULDER CIVIC AREA: "THIS IS THE MUNICIPAL BUILDING. THIS IS THE WATER, AND THE DUCKS, AND A RAINBOW. THESE ARE MORE DUCKS, JUST ON LAND. THIS IS THE WATERFALL. THAT'S THE PLACE NEXT TO THE MUNICIPAL BUILDING WHERE WE ATE SNACK. THIS IS THE BUS STOP." PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS

If our fear had held us back, we would have missed the opportunity to experience the children's sense of pride in their accomplishments. They would not regularly spend their classroom time designing libraries, discussing creeks, imagining water parks for ducks, and creating public art for the Boulder Civic Area. They might not believe their ideas are extremely important, and would not have experienced how much their city cares about what they have to say.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the City of Boulder would not have benefited from a plan for the development of their new "Civic Heart," infused with the musings of preschoolers.

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THE CHILDREN OBSERVED DUCKS FROM THE BOULDER CREEK BANK, WHILE THE SCHOOL'S COMMUNITY SPECIALIST, LAUREN DOCUMENTED. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS