CHAPTER 1

Tuning Adult Ears to the Voices of Young Children

FIGURE 1.1. A 4-year-old child demonstrating with his parents against the war in Iraq. © Boulder Journey School, 2010

At Boulder Journey School, efforts to understand how young children think about children's rights began in earnest in early 2003. Shortly after the United States began its military campaign in Iraq, a 4-year-old boy who demonstrated with his parents against the war carried a protest sign into his class at Boulder Journey School and declared, "1, 2, 3, 4 . . . we don't want your muddy war." The sign intrigued his classmates, one of whom asserted, "Soldiers don't have the right to kill other people." The teachers began to wonder what children thought about rights. They arranged an initial meeting of a small group of 4-year-olds and asked, "What is a right? If someone says, 'I have a right to do that,' or 'I have a right to think that way,' what does it mean?" (I. Hillman, 2003). The children discussed their ideas until they agreed on statements made by two children. One child stated, "A right is like you know in your heart it's okay to do it . . . you can do it if you want and that's it." Another child added, "But only if it's okay, like you won't hurt somebody and it's not safe . . . because the other person has a right to not be hurt too, right?· Over the ensuing weeks, the children compiled a list of their rights (Pufall, Rudkin, & Hall, 2004; Rudkin & Hall, 2005), which appears in Figure 1.2.

FIGURE 1.2. Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights.© Boulder Journey School, 2010.

- Children have a right to plant flowers and plants with other people
- Children have a right to grow taller
- Children have a right to run or walk, to choose which one, if it's safe
- Children have a right to have friends
- Children have a right to touch everything, but gently, but not birds because that can scare them very much
- Children have a right to pretend that there's a beach anywhere
- Children have a right to pretend everything
- Children have a right to pretend with glass, but not a right to drop it 'cause that's not safe
- Children have a right to climb mountains, ski on the mountains (when there is snow), and play on the mountains (because the mountains are there for all of us to use)
- Children have a right to take off their clothes when they are hot, but not their socks
- Children have a right to have fun
- Children have a right to read books when they are crying (so they don't have to talk about it right away)
- Children have a right to sing, and to sing to other people
- Children have a right to help other people and even birds with broken wings (so it's okay for people to touch them)
- Children have a right to play all day
- Children have a right to twist their own ears, but not a right to twist other people's ears (a child must ask the other person first)
- Children have a right to be asked if someone wants to twist their ears
- Children have a right to guess how things work
- Children have a right to be in love and love each other
- Children have a right to eat grapes whichever way they choose, like peeling them first, if they want
- Children have a right to make ideas with other people
- Children have a right to be safe from fires and have firefighters ready to help them if there is a fire
- Children have a right to fall down when they feel like being crazy
- Children have a right to sleep when they are tired, or not to sleep when they are not tired, like just resting
- Children have a right to have their hair look like they want, but not a right to cut it unless they ask first
- Children have a right to choose their own clothes (and parents have a right to buy clothes for children if they want, but parents do not have a right to steal clothes)
- Children have a right to never, never go to jail
- Children have a right to pretend being dead and think about what it means to be dead
- Children have a right to eat some cheese or an apple when they are hungry
- Children have a right to good stuff that makes them happy
- Children have a right to clean air
- Children have a right to clean, fresh food to eat and if the food is dirty, they can say, 'NO!'
- Children have a right to clean, cold water or clean, hot water or clean, warm water
- Children have a right to chew soft gum, especially if it's the kind that cleans your teeth, but not a right to hard gum, like one might find at Copper Mountain's gumball machine
- Children have a right to talk, as long as they do not interrupt someone else who is talking first, but children have a right to wait for their turn to talk

FIGURE 1.2. Continued

- Children have a right to color with paint or markers and to choose which one
- Children have a right to eat brownies and make brownies
- Children have a right to get their own silverware
- Children have a right to brush their own teeth (and parents have a right to check their teeth when the children are done brushing)
- Children have a right to say, 'No!' or 'Stop it!' when people are tickling them without asking
- Children have a right to say, 'Yes!' when people tickle them, too
- Children have a right to have their words heard by other people
- Children have a right to be listened to
- Children have a right to walk away from people who are bothering them, but ask the bothering people to stop first to see if that works
- Children have a right to tell silly jokes
- Children have a right to build bridges out of peppers and other silly things with their lunch, if they can eat it, too
- Children have a right to know what time it is, and how many minutes they have to wait for something (their turn), and the time it will be when it's finally their turn
- Children have a right to wrestle or play fight, but not a right to punch (and maybe they can play rough on a bed)
- Children have a right to not be called names
- Children have a right to play tea parties, even with real tea
- Children have a right to crawl like kitties
- Children have a right to paint their fingernails, boys and girls, with their moms
- Children have a right to hug and kiss
- Children have a right to say, 'No' to mouth kisses
- Children have a right to play with Mom and Dad (after they are busy)
- Children have a right to watch kid TV shows, but not adult shows (because they are boring)
- Children have a right to watch adult TV shows if Mom or Dad say 'okay,' like Enterprise or Survivor
- Children have a right to watch movies, but not scary ones, but actually, they can watch a scary movie every once in a while
- Children have a right to tell parents and teachers to help them if they have a big problem
- Children have a right to solve their own problems whenever they can
- Children have a right to hang upside-down when it's safe

The sheer magnitude of the Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights should dispel any notion of young children as empty vessels waiting to be filled with adult ideas, including ideas about their rights. The Charter on Children's Rights makes clear that young children have important insights into the issue of children's rights and how it pertains to their own lives. The profound thoughts of this small group of children led Boulder Journey School faculty to wonder, "How can we give voice to *all* the children at the school, including children who are preverbal?"

The Finnish educator Monika Riihela held that infants as young as 8 months have ideas to share. She asserted that every person, no matter how young, has stories to tell.

> So it does not depend on the age of the teller, but on the sensitivity of the listener. A newborn baby is looking in your eyes, making silent questions, asking for cooperation for building a common world. That is the beginning of stories. (reported in Alderson, 2000b, pp. 26-27)

The literal meaning of "infant" is unable to speak, but children's "voices" can be heard from birth, provided adults take the time and effort to listen (Pugh & Selleck, 1996, p. 123). Researching the ideas of young children requires indirect methods of inquiry; one cannot simply ask children to talk about rights (Langsted, 1994; see also Clark & Moss, 2001). Nevertheless, children of all ages offer valuable insights about rights, if society can become attuned to children's ways of communicating (McLeod, 2008).

LISTENING TO YOUNG CHILDREN

A children's rights movement must be as much about "adult ears" as it is about "children's voices" (R. Hart, 1998, cited in Miljeteig, 2000, p. 171). At Boulder Journey School, our research on children's rights has led us to specify four suggestions for tuning adult ears to the voices of young children.

Listening Creatively: Can Adults Appreciate Children's Many Languages?

Adult society relies on the spoken and written word. Parents note and celebrate a child's first words, but rarely mark other hallmarks in communication, such as the first time a child points to request an object or represents something by imitating it, for example, flapping her or his arms to signify a bird (Doherty-Sneddon, 2003). Listening to young children means appreciating that they communicate using a wide array of languages. If children do indeed speak using 100 languages, then in order to understand what children are saying, adults must listen with all of *their* creativity. Rinaldi (2001) proposed "listening not just with our ears but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation). Listening to the hundred, the thousand languages" (p. 80).

In working to appreciate the perspectives of young children, verbal language proves to be a source of misunderstanding, as well as understanding. As an example of misunderstanding, one teacher seeking insight into the perspectives of 2- and 3-year-old children began a conversation on rights using a book about a mouse named Toby. For each page of the book, she mapped Toby's experience onto the issue of rights. For example, on the page depicting Toby and his mother embracing, the teacher said, "Toby has the right to hug his mother." At the end of the book, she invited the children to consider their rights. One girl responded by drawing lines on the book with her finger and calling out the names of letters. It took the teacher a few minutes to realize the child had confused the word "rights" with the more familiar word "writes."

As a second example of misunderstanding, several teachers decided to avoid the use of the word "rights" in their research with 3- and 4-year-old children. They asked instead, "Is it okay to be happy? ... Is it okay to be sad? ... Is it okay to be angry?" The teachers had seen evidence of the children asserting their right to anger and sadness and so were surprised by the children's insistence that it was okay to be happy but *not* okay to be sad or to be angry. The question, "Is it okay to be?" has very different connotations, however, than the question, "Do you have a right to be?" Children's assertions that sadness and anger were not okay may stem from their awareness that these emotions were not always okay with their parents or teachers or peers, or that being angry or sad did not feel okay to them. The children nevertheless might have believed that they had a *right* to be angry and sad as well as happy.

Children's unfamiliarity with abstract terms and their more concrete use of language can impede child-adult understanding. On the other hand, children's use of language can elucidate the issues at hand with a poet's precision. Consider the following exchange among three 5-year-olds:

First Child: I would like to have a car that is my size with really big wheels. I can drive my daddy to school and then I can go to McDonald's and eat trench fries.

Second Child: Wow! ... I would like to have a room that is my size. I would like it if I could climb in my bed without my daddy picking me up ...

Third Child: ... I would like a sink on the floor.

These children were speaking about the dependence on adults that arises, not from lack of competence, but from their small stature in an adult-sized world. The third child seemed to be requesting, in a poetic way, not an actual sink on the floor but autonomy in performing the daily task of hand washing. This dialogue illustrates that '"listening' to very young children does not necessarily mean taking all their utterances at face value, but it does mean observing the nuances" (Pugh & Selleck, 1996, p. 121).

Boulder Journey School educators provide numerous materials to facilitate children's communication in a variety of languages, including drawing, painting, clay work, wire sculpting, photography, and manipulations of natural materials and blocks. Examples appear throughout this book, but let us include one drawing here.

A classroom of 2-year-olds at Boulder Journey School received a gift from a family member, and the teacher helped the children write a letter of appreciation. They then took a class trip to mail their letter. When the children arrived at the mailbox, they were dismayed to find that it loomed far out of their reach. The children did not want the teacher to lift them up to reach it, resulting in a long-term investigation exploring how children could mail a letter independently. Ultimately, they agreed on the use of a stepstool. During this investigation, one of the children

FIGURE 1.3. A 2-year-old child's drawing of a mailbox towering high atop a very long post. © Boulder Journey School, 2010.

drew a picture (Figure 1.3) depicting with poignant precision a mailbox towering high atop a very long post. Like the poetic notion of a sink on the floor, this drawing conveys with artistic precision the sense of smallness that children often experience in the world of adults.

In addition to providing children with opportunities to use a multitude of languages, educators have gained insights into young children's understanding of rights through careful "listening" to children's behavior. A teacher of 1-year-olds, for example, watched her students play in the school theater where hobbyhorses are stored in tall buckets beyond the children's reach. Children of many ages, including the 1-year-olds, enjoy using these hobbyhorses to pretend and play. The teacher noticed that the children persisted in trying to obtain these objects by hovering nearby, pointing, tugging at the parts of the toy they could reach, and vocalizing. She hypothesized that the children believed they had a right to use the horses, and contrasted their persistence in trying to obtain the horses with their lack of persistence in obtaining desired objects to which the children did not feel entitled, such as classmates' bottles.

In listening to children's behavior, adults must attend closely to their play. Developmental psychologists and early childhood educators increasingly understand that play is crucial to the well-being and development of children, and is the main activity through which children seek and find meaning (E. Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wenner, 2009). The play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith wrote that because "children up until about seven years of age communicate with each other more adequately by play than in speech, an argument can certainly be made that their childhood right to play is the same as our adult First Amendment right to free speech" (quoted in Nabhan & Trimble, 1994, p. 9).

Authors of the Charter on Children's Rights also recognized the importance of play in children's lives. They declared, "Children have a right to pretend everything," and "Children have a right to play all day."

Listening Patiently: Can Adults Appreciate the Significance of Time?

Children's rights researcher Priscilla Alderson (2000a) listed numerous barriers to children's rights, including language barriers and adults' fear of losing control. A perceived lack of time was, however, first on the list. At Boulder Journey School, teachers repeatedly report that a commitment to honoring children's rights means appreciating the importance of slowing down. Here is one example.

A teacher of 1-year-olds decided to analyze archival photos of her classroom as a means of listening to what infants were saying about their rights. The teacher noticed that although the infants had all become mobile, photographs still depicted adults carrying infants from place to place. She wondered if the teachers'

well-intentioned inclination to carry children illustrated a lack of respect for the children's right to autonomy. For the next scheduled trip to the theater, teachers in this classroom offered children the opportunity to travel on their own, either by crawling or walking along the low ballet bars in the hallway. In order to maximize the chances of children completing their journey, teachers departed 30 minutes before their scheduled visit to the theater. They found that it actually took less time for the children to arrive at the theater under their own power than it had for the teachers to carry them two by two. Which is not to advocate 1-year-olds transporting themselves on the grounds of efficiency. In this case, children arrived at the theater quickly, but letting children exercise autonomy often requires patience.

Listening to and respecting the rights of children means providing time. It may take time for children to exercise autonomy when they are mastering such new skills as crawling or walking down hallways, climbing into car seats, putting on socks and shoes, or washing their hands. Similarly, it may take time for children to express their thoughts and desires, especially when using a language that is not yet well developed. It also takes time for adults to understand the languages that children may prefer, such as creative expression and play. Adults may have neglected and forgotten these languages in the course of growing up.

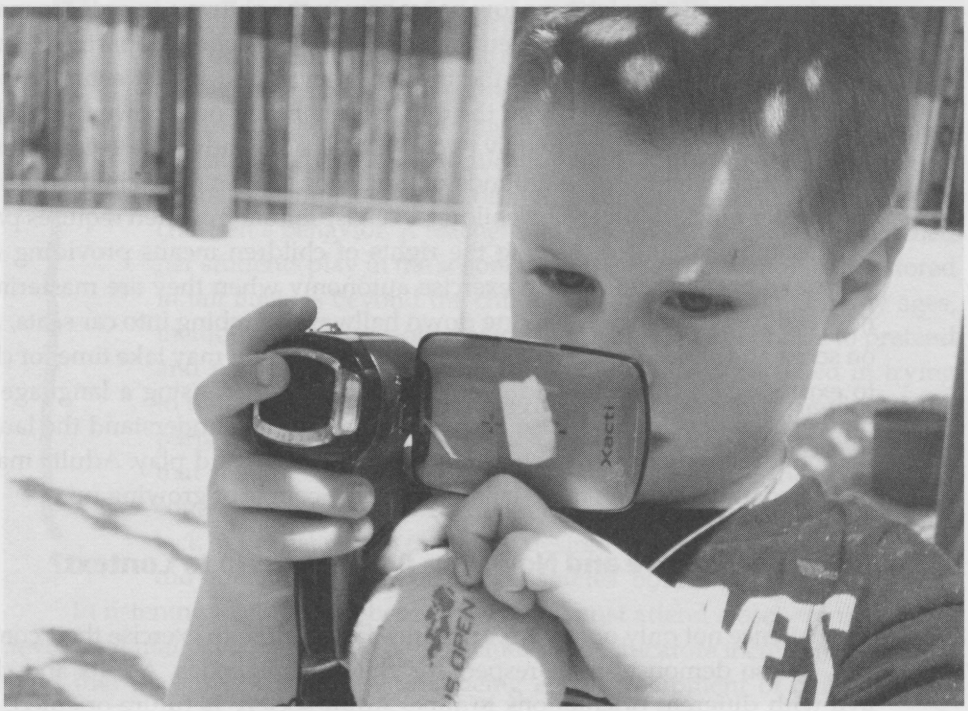
Listening in the Here and Now: Can Adults Attend to Context?

Patience not only opens opportunities for children to exercise their competencies, it also demonstrates a respect for children's agendas. Adults and children live with different orientations to time. Adult society is future-oriented. Adults tend to concern themselves with upcoming appointments, undone tasks, and even more distant events such as their children's enrollment in college and their own retirement. Children, on the other hand, are sensitive to the wonders of the here and now, wonders for which they eagerly forego other agendas (e.g., Langsted, 1994). They exist in the moment and focus on what they find before them. Children encounter numerous marvels on the way to the car or to the store that merit examination-the intriguing shapes and splashes of puddles, the intricate pathways of bugs and worms, the irresistible gleams of shining treasures lying on the street disguised as trash.

Differing orientations to time can create challenges for adults and children alike. The adults' desire to hurry easily eclipses the child's momentary fascinations, and it can be difficult for adults to share authentically the focus of children's interests. The challenge of integrating different time orientations led one adult writer to describe childhood as a time when "the days are endless and the years fly by" (Schiff, 2003).

As an example of children's fascination with what lies immediately before them, consider the experiences of a Boulder Journey School teacher interested in helping 2-year-olds express themselves through the language of photography. The mechanics of taking a photograph challenge young children, who may find the size and heft of the camera awkward and the closing of one eye in order to look

FIGURE 1.4. Photography may be challenging for young children.© Boulder Journey School, 2010.



through the viewfinder difficult. This teacher found that as the children manipulated the camera, their fingers often got in the way of the lens. On one occasion a child's finger obscured the lens almost entirely. As the teacher and child reviewed this photograph, the teacher began to advise the child on how to hold the camera more effectively, while the child erupted in elation over the results. ·1rs my finger!" he exclaimed. His classmates shared his excitement. 'Take a picture of my finger next:

Given children's attentiveness to the here and now, educators at Boulder Journey School have found that children's discussions, including discussions of rights, are particularly rich when they center on issues salient for children at that moment. This often can be attributed to their development (e.g., issues of mobility or sharing) or based on current events in the school or in the home (e.g., a new class pet or the birth of a sibling). Similarly, specific questions are best explored when the children are in a context relevant to the questions at hand: talking about the class pet while in front of its cage, for example, or considering the ethics of sharing while arguments over a toy are fresh in the children's minds (see Langsted, 1994).

During lunch, one teacher invited 4-year-old children to consider children's rights around mealtime decisions. Mealtime certainly constitutes an important area of inquiry, as numerous entries in the Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights concern food. The teacher asked, "How would having a say in

FIGURE 1.5. Teachers invited 3-year-old children into the infant classroom to play, observe, and reflect on infants' rights. © Boulder Journey School, 2010.

what food is packed in your lunch make you feel and why?" Most children did not currently have input into the content of their lunches, but wanted input, and gave answers that suggested they would make responsible choices. One girl who said she would choose to pack fruit noted, "Big apples make you bigger because they are healthy."

The teacher also asked, "Would you enjoy deciding when you eat your lunch at school and why?" He had reasoned that the requirement that children eat together at an adult-determined time was not respectful of the children's autonomy. The teacher hypothesized that children would welcome the chance to decide on mealtimes for themselves. The children's responses surprised him. Children thought it more important to share mealtime with friends than to eat when they were hungry. As one boy responded, "I love Nicholas and Natalie. It is important to eat with friends and it's sad without."

Another example of the importance of immediate context emerged in a project seeking insight into preverbal infants' perspectives through the eyes of older children. Teachers brought two 3-year-old children into the infant classroom to play, observe, and reflect on infants' rights. The teachers initiated the conversation by asking the older children what infants could do. When they were interviewed in the infant classroom, the older children generated 25 ideas about what infants could do. They noted, for example, that infants could "shake and clap when they are happy; and "play together and by themselves." The older children had very few ideas about infants' competencies, however, when interviewed in a quiet conference room away from the infants.

FIGURE 1.6. Children are inherently social at the earliest of ages.© Boulder Journey School, 2010.

Listening to Collective (as Well as Individual) Voices: Can Adults Honor Children's Social Lives?

Traditional notions of psychosocial development conceptualize children as essentially presocial (i.e., egocentric and in need of training in empathy and perspective-taking) or as antisocial (i.e., egocentric and in need of adult-imposed social mores) (Oakley, 1994). At Boulder Journey School, however, we find children to be inherently social at the earliest of ages and, beginning in infancy, children spend much of their school day working together in pairs and small groups.

From the initial exchanges among children discussing the antiwar sign to the conversations in the subsequent projects described throughout this book, insights into the perspectives of children were gleaned primarily from one or more teachers interacting with children in small groups. Children continually asserted, counter-asserted, built on one another's ideas, and revised their thinking. In small-group gatherings, children showed their caring for one another and their ability to listen to and support one another's conceptualizations (see also Mayall, 2000a). As the authors of the Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights observed, "Children have a right to make ideas with other people."

Lev Vygotsky (1978) enriched developmental psychology immeasurably by conceptualizing learning as a social transaction. Key to his theory is the notion of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Although educators at Boulder Journey School find the notion of ZPD useful, we have questioned two tenets. First, we wonder why only *independent* problem solving indicates "actual

developmental level" (why not joint problem solving?). Second, we find that enhanced competence does not require "more capable peers"-only *companionable* peers. In our work with children at Boulder Journey School we find that when working together, peers at similar levels of development build ideas and enhance one another's understanding of the world around them.

The notion that children build ideas and gain insight through discussion with peers, although consistent with the social constructivist perspective of Boulder Journey School, runs counter to traditional views of children as antisocial or presocial. It also runs counter to the preferred methodologies of traditional research: large-scale assessments of isolated individuals who either fill out a questionnaire alone at a desk or participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher in a quiet and secluded room. Such methodologies remove children from relevant contexts and prevent them from exhibiting their collective competence. The preference for such isolating assessment techniques may help explain why "tests of children show far fewer capabilities than children exhibit in the course of the day, in conversation" (Alderson, 2000b, p. 82).

CHILDREN'S INSIGHTS ABOUT CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

It is all too easy to miss the voices of children, and the four suggestions for listening delineated above do not constitute an exhaustive list. One also might make a case for the importance of attentiveness, openness, flexibility, and numerous other qualities. Perhaps the core component of true listening is a willingness to learn from and be changed by what the other says. When adults position ourselves far above the children in our lives, we risk creating chasms too wide for young children to breech. When adults assume attitudes that are in any way dismissive, judgmental, or all-knowing, we may silence all but the most outspoken of children and risk that even those brave voices fall on deaf ears.

The authors believe that young children are far more competent than most adults imagine. We hope to show throughout this book that young children understand, and have much to teach adults, about the notion of rights. In this first chapter we have seen that children recognize the importance of their right to self-expression. Authors of the Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights asserted, "Children have a right to have their words heard by other people," and "Children have a right to be listened to." The authors also recognize that children speak in nonverbal as well as verbal languages, declaring, "Children have a right to color with paint or markers and to choose which one," and "Children have a right to sing, and to sing to other people." Furthermore, children understand that rights, including the right to self-expression, are not contingent on age. As noted earlier, several 2- and 3-year-olds observed that even infants express themselves, conveying their emotions and ideas by shaking and clapping.

Young children not only appreciate the importance of self-expression, they also demonstrate a keen awareness of the delicate balances required by the no-

tion of rights. One tension we explore throughout this book is the need to balance children's perspectives and adults' perspectives. Children demonstrate an astute awareness of the privileges and responsibilities of the adults in their lives. In the Charter on Children's Rights, for example, children stated, "Children have a right to brush their own teeth (and parents have a right to check their teeth when the children are done brushing): As another example, for the project in which 2- and 3-year-olds reflected on the rights of infants, the teachers offered the older children markers and paper and encouraged storytelling and drawing. The following story resulted.

> Maggie was looking at a beautiful butterfly and she wanted to touch it, but she couldn't walk. What if Walter saw a friendly spider but he couldn't get it because he didn't know how to walk? They couldn't walk and the teacher had to come and get them closer.

These young children expressed the sophisticated notion (explored further in the section in Chapter 2 on disability rights) that infants have a right to experience their environments despite their lack of mobility, and that adults have a responsibility to foster infants' participation in the world around them.

A second tension inherent to children's rights is the need to balance protection rights and participation rights (a focus of Chapter 3). Young children understand this balance as well. They believe that they should be able to make choices, but that these choices are constrained by concerns for safety. For example, one right listed in the Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights is, "Children have a right to pretend with glass, but not a right to drop it 'cause that's not safe." And another: "Children have a right to run or walk, to choose which one, if it's safe." Children also understand that the manifestation of rights, particularly protection rights, changes across development. Older children appreciated the greater need for protection earlier in life. As one 3-year-old working with the infants noted, "We have to keep babies from choking:

A third tension that recurs throughout this book is the tension between individual liberties and communal responsibilities (see Chapter 4). Children are eager to live and work with others, especially other children, and show a keen sensitivity to varying perspectives. As one of many examples of children's ability to hold different viewpoints in balance, consider this entry in the Charter on Children's Rights: "Children have a right to talk, as long as they do not interrupt someone else who is talking first, but children have a right to wait for their turn to talk." Each of these tensions is explored in the theoretical discussion of the first four chapters, and illustrated in the two more applied chapters that follow.

CONCLUSION

The work on children's rights that children and educators at Boulder Journey School began in earnest in 2003 continues to this day, and the Boulder Journey

School Charter on Children's Rights remains central to our work. The authors have shared this Charter, and the projects that followed, with students, teachers, conference participants, other children, family members, and now with you, the reader of this book. The Charter hangs prominently in the hallway of Boulder Journey School, conveying children's ideas about their rights to all who pass by, and it has served as a daily reminder to the authors of what we are writing about and why.

For Further Thought

1. Think of a time when, as a child, you didn't think your rights were supported. Describe the event and how it made you feel.
2. Recall an instance when you witnessed a child's rights being disregarded. Describe the occurrence, how you felt, and what you did or could have done to support the child.
3. Think of an occasion when you were surprised by a child's competence. Discuss the occasion and what it means in terms of your assumptions about children and/or your images of children. In this instance, what do you think enabled you to tune your ears to children's voices?
4. Which entry in the Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights stands out most for you? Why do you think this entry is notable? Share the Boulder Journey School Charter on Children's Rights with a child or group of children and ask the same question.