

“Of, Not For...”: The Evolving Recognition of Children’s Rights in a Community

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This article describes the development of a charter of rights of children and youth in Hamilton, Ontario. The process involved gathering input from over 1,500 children and youth in the form of spoken and written words, drawings, and other visual representations. A validation process resulted in over 900 more children being directly engaged. The inclusion of participatory responsibilities for both children and adults appears to have increased the level of acceptance of the charter among adults. Awareness of the document was aided by its multiple formats of publication and by an exhibit that toured key locations throughout the city, beginning at City Hall.

Key words: children’s rights; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; participation; community collaboration; responsibility

Why Would a City in Canada Create a Charter of Children’s Rights?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) acknowledges that children are a minority group that could be oppressed and exploited by adults, who form the political majority. Although there is ample evidence that children around the world continue to suffer in many ways, this declaration that children deserve respect and support because they have inherent rights is regarded as a significant step forward. It allows children to be social participants. In Howe’s (2007) words, “Children are in a better position with it than without it” (p. 3). Rights alone do not guarantee progress, but change is happening (albeit it slowly) for Indigenous people and for persons with disabilities, both of whom are subjects of Declarations of Rights. But if commitment to the UNCRC is to be more than symbolic, the issues must be brought to people’s attention and discussed within families, within communities, and in the wider context.

The topic of children’s rights provokes a wide range of responses. The UNCRC was unanimously approved on

November 20, 1989, at the forty-fourth session of the General Assembly, and subsequently all but two countries in the world (the USA and Somalia) signed it. Canada signed in 1990 and ratified it in Parliament in 1991, but many Canadians, including teachers and parents, are still unaware of its existence. This concern was expressed in the concluding observations related to Canada during the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child

Sixty-First Session (2012):

Nevertheless, the Committee is concerned that awareness and knowledge of the Convention remains limited amongst children, professionals working with children, parents, and the general public. The Committee is especially concerned that there has been little effort to systematically disseminate information on the Convention and integrate child rights education into the school system. (p. 5)

In a 2005 Ipsos-Reid poll, 61% of the public indicated their belief that children's rights are already fully realized in Canada, yet only 46% were even aware of the UNCRC (Howe & Covell, 2007). Our recent conversations with parents and educators revealed that many are still unaware of the UNCRC.

There continue to be significant gaps between the rights identified in the Convention and those that are recognized in our laws, practices, and daily interactions, as evidenced by the report cards that have been issued by the United Nations (UNICEF Innocenti Report Cards 10, 11, and 13). Covell and Howe (2001; see also Howe & Covell, 2007) raise serious questions about Canada's commitment to children's rights. Our country tied with Ireland for last place among 25 developed nations in the UN's first comparison of early childhood services (UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 8), meeting only one of the benchmarks described in the report as representing basic minimum standards: having 50% of staff in accredited early education services with relevant tertiary education qualification. Our Criminal Code continues to include Section 43, which provides a legal defence for the use of corporal punishment of children, making them the only Canadians who are deprived of full legal protection from physical assault. We are only beginning to address the damage done by over 100 years of residential schools, where Indigenous children were isolated from their families, stripped of their language and culture, and often abused. Despite the federal government's 1989 All Party commitment to eradicate childhood poverty by the year 2000, 18.5% of Canadian children live in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2017), and the rate is dramatically higher (almost 60%) for Indigenous children. According to UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 10, we ranked 24th of 35 industrialized countries on child poverty, and on Report card 11 on child well-being in rich countries, Canada ranked 17th out of 35. These facts unsettle the general complacency Canadians may have about our overall treatment of children.

The UNCRC is not without its critics. Canadians are not unanimous in the view that children *should* have rights, let alone in recognizing that they *do have* inherent rights (Howe, 2007). The predominant image we hold of the young child is one of innocence and weakness, needing protection, although this has not always been the case and is not a universal image. As children enter adolescence in our culture, their image often shifts to one of "barely rational, unsocialized, and unlawful" (Howe & Covell, 2007, p. 405), needing to be controlled and punished. These views are socially constructed. There is also a view that acknowledging rights for children inevitably diminishes adults' rights. Among those who support the idea of recognizing children's rights, some argue that the UNCRC does not go far enough in recognizing children's inherent rights, because adults are still given sovereignty, particularly when there is seen to be competition between rights to participation and protection (e.g., Gadda, 2008; Handley, 2005). Others (e.g., Burr, 2004; Stephens, 1995) raise concern that, regardless of the fact that the majority of the world population of children lives in non-Western communities, the UNCRC's fundamental grounding in individual rights is contextualized in dominant Western concepts, and it is unable to accommodate societies in which communal rights are the norm. Despite controversy, the document is widely respected, Canada is a signatory, and we are far from "there" in living up to our commitment. As Howe and Covell (2008) state:

We are a long way from achieving a unitary conception of children as rights-bearing citizens. For Canadians to appreciate the status of children as rights bearers and the status of parents, other adults, and governments as duty bearers, there will need to be a fundamental shift in their

attitudes toward children. (p. 407)

There would appear to be a solid rationale for a city to take up the issue of children's rights and create a context that allows sustained and direct engagement and dialogue that involves children.

The Context: A Confluence of Factors

Hamilton is a city of over 500,000 people whose identity is changing. Formerly known for manufacturing and steel production, between 1998 and 2013 there was a drop of about 45% in the share of Hamilton workers employed in manufacturing jobs (Statistics Canada, 1998, 2013). The impact of this loss of good-paying jobs will be felt for years to come. Hamilton is a culturally diverse city: According to the 2011 National Household Survey, more than 25% of the local population was not born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). The city also has a vibrant francophone community and, with its proximity to Six Nations and the Mississaugas of the New Credit reserves, a significant Indigenous population (Social Planning and Research Council, 2015). Hamilton is known for its gritty spirit and generosity, even when faced with considerable challenges. In 2014, City Council voted to declare Hamilton a sanctuary city, offering municipal services to undocumented immigrants at risk of deportation.

Interest in children's rights at the local level is not new. In 1999, the city formed a working group with representation from several sectors to create a charter of children's rights. A respectable document resulted. However, as so often happens, it became part of an archive, and few people were aware it existed. Significantly, children had no voice in the development of that document. In December 2007, city council declared its intention to make Hamilton "the best place to raise a child." Nevertheless, challenges prevail (Carter, 2015). Many initiatives have been undertaken to improve conditions *for* children. Seldom are the views *of* children invited in the development of those initiatives, though.

For several years, one of this article's authors (Karyn Callaghan) taught a course called "Rights of the Child" to university students. The students conducted surveys and focus groups involving parents and non-parents, teachers and non-teachers to explore the UNCRC. They often found that, consistent with the UN's criticism, there was little to no awareness of the Convention. After they provided information, the reactions ranged from support to antagonism. Acceptance was strongest on rights associated with provision (i.e., ensuring that children have adequate shelter, food, education, health care), mixed on rights associated with protection (which would include absence of corporal punishment), and generally negative on rights associated with participation (having a voice in decisions that affect them in families, schools, communities). The students concluded that many adults feared their control would be usurped if children knew they had rights.

Two other projects may have contributed to a context that was more prepared to enact practices in recognition that children can and should have a voice – a voice that may be spoken, but that also may be drawn or constructed using a variety of materials as languages. The Artists at the Centre project began in Hamilton in 2001, bringing professional artists into early learning and child care programs to support children and educators to make the children's thinking visible by supporting the children's intentional use of materials such as markers, paint, wire, and clay as languages for communicating ideas. Inspired by the infant-toddler centres and preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, this project was based on a view of the child as capable of complex thought and communication. (For more information, see www.artistsatthecentre.ca.) Culture for Kids in the Arts (CKA), an arts education organization, produces an annual community arts project that was influenced by Artists at the Centre, called Artasia. In 2011, children were invited to engage with and create artworks that described visions of their neighbourhoods transformed. Hamilton's Neighbourhood Action Strategy Director invited one of the children to present these messages at a city council meeting, where they were well received.

In 2005, the Best Start Network was formed in Hamilton. This multisectoral network meets several times a year, bringing together representatives from a wide range of education, health, and social services to streamline and effectively design supports for children and families. One committee that formed under this umbrella focused on parent engagement with their child(ren) and with family supports in the community, and drafted the Hamilton Parent Charter of Rights (Hamilton Best Start Network, 2014). Once it was launched, the idea of resurrecting and reviewing the charter of children's rights arose, and an ad hoc committee was formed. An early years project manager for the city of Hamilton assumed the role of chair, bringing not only organizational skills, but also a breadth of knowledge of the city and ability to make connections with youth leaders, licensed child care centres, elementary and secondary schools, Parks & Recreation playground supervisors, the library system, child and family centres, camps, and social justice event organizers. The fact that the city was enthusiastically backing this project, not only philosophically but also through dedicated time from a few employees over a sustained period, was significant for the success of the project. It also increased the chance that the resulting document would be widely distributed and endorsed.

Representatives from the Indigenous child care community, local school boards, and youth program managers joined the ad hoc committee that met monthly over a 20-month period. From the inception of this committee, there was a shared recognition that young children understand and have much to teach adults about the notion of rights. In keeping with the sociology of childhood, we embraced the view of young children as effective and knowledgeable persons and key witnesses to their own lives (Mayall, 2002), and recognized that a commitment to inviting children's perspectives is not an option or a gift to be given by adults but "a legal imperative which is the right of the child" (Lundy, 2007, p. 931).

Putting the Evolving Plan into Motion

The ad hoc committee, aware of the challenges inherent in creating a context wherein children can freely and meaningfully express their ideas in a way that can be understood (Spyrou, 2011), realized that it would be essential for educators and facilitators to engage in their own discussions of children's rights before they could comfortably introduce the topic to young children. We organized a meeting at the local community college, and a capacity crowd of educators from across the city came to learn more about children's rights, explore their own feelings, and discuss approaches to inviting children to share their ideas about their rights. They heard a brief overview of the UNCRC and Canada's track record and saw a demonstration of how several classic children's books, such as *Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats and *Red is Best* by Kathy Stinson, could be discussed through the lens of rights. A book of the words and drawings of 5- and 6-year-old children from Reggio Emilia provided compelling evidence that young children are more than capable of understanding and communicating about this seemingly abstract topic (Reggio Children, 1995). The Artasia projects were also highlighted, and examples of children's work were shared. We discussed the subtleties of distinguishing between a want, a need, and a right. We also offered examples of how educators could respond to classroom situations using the lens and language of rights, so that children could have a context for the concept. This introduction of the concept of rights was expected to take several weeks. To support this ongoing work, we created a list of books about children's rights for educators to access, as well as resource kits that could be borrowed through the local ECE resource centre. Thirty copies of *A Journey into the Rights of Children*, a book about rights written and illustrated by children in Reggio Emilia, were made available for the community to borrow.

Support Materials

Examples of classic storybooks that can be discussed through the lens of children's rights:

Baldacchino, C. (2014). *Morris Micklewhite and the tangerine dress*. Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books/House of Anansi Press.

Keats, E. J. (1967). *Peter's chair*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Kraus, R. (1971). *Leo the late bloomer*. New York, NY: Windmill Books.

Stinson, K. (1982). *Red is best*. Toronto, ON: Annick Press.

Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's doll*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Books for children and adults about children's rights

Reggio Children. (1995). *A journey into the rights of children*. Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children S.r.l.

Serres, A. (2009). *I have the right to be a child*. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press.

UNICEF. (2002). *For every child: The rights of the child in words and pictures*. London, UK: Red Fox Books.

Resource for educators of young children

Hall, E. L., & Kofkin Rudkin, J. (2011). *Seen and heard: Children's rights in early childhood education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

When the educators felt the children were ready, they were asked to invite the children to complete the statement "I have a right to ..." and to communicate their thoughts by drawing with fine black markers on white paper, a method that is aligned to children's demonstrated capacities to express their understandings of the world around them (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013).

Although this was not a research study, we wanted to respect children's right to give or withhold informed consent, consistent with approaches used when children participate in research (e.g., Dockett, Perry, & Kearney, 2012). Samples of child-friendly consent forms were created and made available to the educators (see excerpts in Figures 1 and 2) so that the children could just point to the illustrated face that reflected their response to the invitation to participate and to have their ideas shared with others. The children were then invited to draw a picture to illustrate a right that was important to them. The child's "I have a right to ..." statement was included on the drawing. The child's first name and age were written on the back of the paper in pencil. We encouraged organizations/educators to make a photocopy of each piece of artwork by children who consented to share their work before it was submitted, so that an exhibit could be created in each of their locations for the children, youth, parents, and community members to appreciate.

Many of the preparatory ideas were also relevant for school-aged children, but rather than drawing, CKA invited children ages 6 to 12 to fold origami cranes from recycled paper with ideas about children's rights tucked inside. The "1,000 Cranes" project was inspired by the traditional Japanese belief that anyone with the patience and commitment to fold 1,000 paper cranes will be granted their most desired wish. Youth aged 12–18 created a

mosaic of artwork to communicate their ideas about rights. We originally set a time frame of four months for the submission of work, but we extended it based on feedback from the centres. The extension also allowed work to be gathered from summer camps and playground groups, as well as from a group of teen parents who were, by legal definition, children themselves. As we reviewed their submissions, it was clear that youth did not want to be referred to as children, despite the UNCRC definition of a child as being anyone under the age of 18.

Child Assent Form

We would like to find out what you think about the rights children should have. We might ask you to read a book with us, have a conversation, take some photos, draw some pictures, or tell us in some other way about your rights.



We would like to record these activities.



Figure 1. Excerpt from the child-friendly consent form.

We have asked your parents if it is okay if we talk to you, and they have said yes. Now we want to know if you would like to talk to us about children’s rights. If you would like to, please print your name here

_____ 

Or, you could draw a circle around the face that shows us how you feel about talking to us.



Figure 2. Excerpt from the child-friendly consent form.

Gathering, Interpreting, Writing, and Validating

We received over 1,500 submissions. The words of the children and youth were documented to identify what they expressed as their rights. A Wordle™ using all the words collected from the artwork revealed the words and phrases the children used most often. Their responses were not frivolous or self-serving: The three that came up most were the right to education, family, and social justice. This is consistent with other findings that children stress interdependence and reciprocity, rather than selfish autonomy (Mayall, 2000), although certainly the dominant discourse of the society in which they are living would affect these values.

In order to invite multiple perspectives to identify the themes, all submissions were viewed and categorized by different groups of various ages (e.g., a university class studying children's rights, the children's charter working group, the high school and university-aged offspring of the working group members, youth, artists). There are challenges inherent in reading visual representations, particularly when adults and youth are attempting to interpret drawings created by young children, although in our culture, we may be overly confident in our belief that we understand words when others use them. In the few cases where there were no accompanying words, interpretations were tentative and were made collaboratively. Each group engaged in the categorizing exercise independently, without being informed of the categories that had been suggested by other groups. In each case, in order to give us a starting point, the hundreds of pieces of work were initially organized using the categories that are often used to discuss the UNCRC: provision, protection, and participation (Howe, 2007, p. 3), but either within each of these, or from pieces that did not really fit into these categories, subcategories arose from the clusters of the children's ideas, and these became more informative and robust, ultimately informing the 18 rights in the charter. While many submissions resonated with the rights in the UNCRC, others did not. For example, the right to care for living things and the right to have friends were not really addressed in the UN document, nor was the right to be proud of who they are. The right to have friends included the right "to argue with my friend and then make up again." Some were more specific than the UNCRC rights, such as the right to live in a home, in a neighbourhood. Within that grouping, children had added their own specific details: it included having the right "to live in a house with a bird house, grass, and trees," and "in a house that is mould-free, bug-free, and asbestos free," and "for my neighbourhood to accept and respect children's rights." Included in the right to live with and be cared for by family, a specific inclusion was "the right to make something with my mom." A selection of these statements is included in the booklet version of the charter. We realized that some of them may have been reflections of what the individual child valued about his or her life, and others may have reflected what was acutely missed. We were aware that the work could possibly be categorized differently by different people, or even by the same people at a different point in time, and hoped that our subsequent validation process would provide us with a measure of confidence that children were satisfied that their main ideas were captured. The children's work was passed on to the Hamilton Best Start Network's research and evaluation team to record data regarding which centre or school the work came from, which medium was used, the children's ages, the theme, and any subcategories. The work was then collected and prepared for the exhibition phase of the project.

Based on the experience of the university students' focus group discussions with adults, the working group engaged in dialogue about including participatory responsibilities for children and adults with each right, with the intention of increasing the level of acceptance among adults and supporting active engagement with the charter. Although responsibility must always bear the weight of the individual, participatory responsibility emerges from a disposition or sensibility that situates one in a broader interdependent context; in short, participatory responsibilities are relationally driven. (R. Khattar, personal communication, July 29, 2017). Including these responsibilities fits with O'Neill's (1994) proposal of a "covenant society" where people recognize civic obligation to each other. It was important to choose suitable words to capture the big ideas that arose in the children's drawings and to frame

the participatory responsibilities in a way that would be clear and at the same time would lower resistance and contribute to a context that can honour rights within social relationships that recognize interdependence.

We invited a community focus group to engage in dialogue one last time before finalizing the draft. A significant decision was made at this meeting: To honour their art and words, we changed the provisional title from “rights for children and youth” to “rights of children and youth,” giving proper attribution to those who generated the ideas. The decision to include participatory responsibilities warranted discussion, as declarations of rights are not typically accompanied by lists of responsibilities (although we recognize that rights generally are countered by laws). We also recognize that this document reflects views at a particular time and place, and it will need to be revisited every few years. It is our hope that, over time, there will be greater acceptance of the fact that children have inherent rights, and we may not need to list the responsibilities in future versions.

We went back to the community to seek validation of the draft charter of rights and responsibilities at two large family-oriented public events that happen in September every year. Each of the 18 rights was printed on a separate vertical banner hanging in a tent (see Figure 3), and children were invited to indicate which one resonated with them by attaching a dot sticker to that banner, a process we referred to as “dotmocracy” (see Figure 4). By the end of these events, every right had many vote-dots on it (see Figure 5). Over 900 children and youth validated the charter.



Figure 3. Culture for Kids in the Arts staff member Cornelia Peckart supporting the “dotmocracy” process.



Figure 4. A parent and child consider the rights prior to the child's voting.



Figure 5. A selection of the banners early in the voting process, each already with many dots and stickers chosen or created by children to indicate what they thought were the most important things for all children to have or to be able to do.

Dissemination

Once the rights were presented and received full endorsement from the Hamilton Best Start Network, the draft was sent to a designer, along with selected drawings, to be prepared for printing. He made a significant suggestion: to change the wording from “children and youth have the right to...” to “I have the right to...” The document was printed in three formats in English and French: a glossy booklet containing the expression of children’s rights by children aged 5 and younger through their drawings and words (including some of the specific examples to illustrate each right), a passport-sized fold-up flyer with the poster on one side and the responsibilities on the other, and a glossy poster for agencies to hang on their walls (see Figure 6). One thousand books (an additional 250 in French), 20,000 flyers, (1,000 in French), and 1,000 posters were printed. All child care centres and schools received posters, flyers, and books. Other groups who requested copies have received them. In response to the children’s right to a healthy earth to live on, recycled paper was used.



Figure 6. Hamilton's Charter of Rights and Responsibilities of Children poster.

Hamilton's Charter of Rights of Children and Youth, and Participatory Responsibilities

I have the right to be heard.

Children are responsible for listening to others and respecting their opinions.

Adults are responsible for asking children for their opinions on all matters that affect them, and seriously considering their views.

I have the right to live in a home, in a neighbourhood.

Children are responsible for helping to take care of the place where they live.

Adults are responsible for making sure our community is providing good quality affordable housing, in neighbourhoods that have access to green space and that support our citizens.

I have the right to live with and be cared for by family.

Children are responsible for respecting and caring for their family.

Adults are responsible for respecting and caring for children and families in their diverse forms, and responding to children's right to feel loved in their family.

I have the right to have friends.

Children are responsible for caring for, respecting, and including others.

Adults are responsible for making it possible for friends to feel welcome and included, and to respect children's ability to settle their own disagreements.

I have the right to good food and warm, clean clothes.

Children are responsible for learning about and eating healthy food and helping to care for their clothing.

Adults are responsible for ensuring that children are aware of healthy and ethical food choices and of where and how food and clothing are produced, and for ensuring that healthy food and suitable clothing are available to all children and their families.

I have the right to a healthy earth to live on.

Children are responsible for caring for their environment and reducing waste.

Adults are responsible for supporting and nurturing children's relationship with the natural environment and working to provide a healthy environment through fixing what is wrong, protecting what is right, and making good decisions for the future of our environment, to build capacity to think in terms of "forever."

I have the right to play.

Children are responsible for including all children in active exploration, enjoyment of movement, and imaginative play at appropriate times.

Adults are responsible for providing both structured and unstructured time and environments for children to play with friends and trusting children to take some risks.

I have the right to learn more things.

Children are responsible for being curious and thoughtful about what is around them, making the most of learning opportunities and respecting the abilities of others.

Adults are responsible for nurturing children's curiosity, supporting their learning by respecting their interests and ways of learning in all contexts, thoughtfully reflecting on their own interventions in children's explorations, actively removing/reducing barriers to full participation in learning, providing stimulating materials and experiences for learning, and building communities that recognize children's competence and intelligence.

I have the right to express myself, my personality and thoughts without judgment.

Children are responsible for communicating respectfully and appreciating the ways others express themselves.

Adults are responsible for providing children with opportunities to express themselves fully, to engage in creative activities, and to stay silent if they choose.

I have the right to privacy.

Children are responsible for respecting the privacy of others.

Adults are responsible for respecting children's belongings, spaces, and need for time alone.

I have the right to make choices.

Children are responsible for considering their decisions carefully.

Adults are responsible for seeking out and seriously considering children's views on all matters that concern them, to help them to make informed decisions, and to recognize the importance of relationships and making a meaningful contribution to their own financial security and independence.

I have the right to special help like a wheelchair if I ever need it.

Children are responsible for including and helping children who need support.

Adults are responsible for working with children to define what meaningful participation is for them, and to accommodate and reduce barriers to full participation for all children.

I have the right to know about and practice my culture.

Children are responsible for respecting other people's language and celebrations.

Adults are responsible for modelling respect for people of all backgrounds, supporting learning about diverse cultures, and learning how to listen in many ways.

I have the right to care for living things.

Children are responsible for caring for animals and contributing to community gardens.

Adults are responsible for supporting children's empathy and care for all living beings and making meaningful contributions to gardens using sustainable methods.

I have the right to be safe, secure, and healthy.

Children are responsible for caring for themselves and others by taking steps to reduce hazards and by avoiding dangerous situations.

Adults are responsible for supporting children's assessment of risk, refusing to inflict pain or emotional harm on children, protecting and strengthening our social safety net, and building communities that are safe for all citizens.

I have the right to be free from discrimination.

Children are responsible for respecting and being empathetic to others.

Adults are responsible for building inclusive communities that welcome and support all people.

I have the right to rest.

Children are responsible for learning about and taking care of their bodies.

Adults are responsible for ensuring a child's time is not overscheduled, and that they have a place to rest.

I have the right to be proud of who I am.

Children are responsible for working to the best of their ability.

Adults are responsible for recognizing children's efforts without comparing them to others, and cultivating spaces where children are able to demonstrate their particular competence.

The educators' experience of having ongoing meaningful conversations with young children about challenging issues and inviting them to communicate their thoughts in different ways may have lasting impact on their practice. The charter and accompanying responsibilities should contribute to a change in how we view children, respect their intelligence, and invite their involvement in decisions that affect them in child care programs, schools, families, hospitals, and other organizations.

We met our goal of having the charter published before Universal Children’s Day, November 20, in the year that marked the 25th anniversary of Canada’s signing of the UNCRC. To honour the city’s endorsement of Hamilton’s Charter of Rights of Children and Youth at a council meeting in November 2015, we created large replica pages of the charter for all to see (Figures 7 and 8). An exhibition intended to spark dialogue on rights and responsibilities was launched at Hamilton City Hall in November 2015. It included a large-scale sculpture constructed of a recycled airplane part, later affectionately referred to as “the wing,” and staggered branches with suspended strands that held all 1,000 paper cranes, each inscribed with rights from children aged 6 to 12 years (see Figure 9). The youth component of the exhibition featured a collage of artwork and words from youth aged 13 to 18 years. This installation included submissions from teen parents. The three-dimensional nature of the exhibit invited people to walk among the panels and the cranes. The exhibit also featured the children’s original work in two binders that visitors could look through. The exhibition toured to over ten civic centres, libraries, hospitals, and recreations centres over a 15-month period, reaching a large cross-section of audiences across the greater Hamilton region.



Figure 7. Panels on display at Hamilton City Hall.



Figure 8. Close-up of panels in exhibit.



Figure 9. Installation of "the wing" and cranes.

Impact

Both the children's charter and the parents' charter have been identified as foundational documents for Hamilton's Early Years Community Plan 2016–2020, which outlines the strategic priorities for the Hamilton early years system. Overall, the charter has been positively received. It is on display in schools and other organizations throughout the city. We are beginning to witness evidence of change in attitudes. At some exhibit venues, the space that had originally been designated for the display was not in a high-visibility location, but once the work arrived, significant accommodations were made to ensure that it was highlighted. We have also seen that some educators are learning about how to have richer conversations with young children as work about rights from individual classrooms is displayed in schools, although we realize this is an area for further growth. This project has also sparked conversations about how we view children. At the first few locations, the exhibit was cordoned off to prevent damage by children, but at one venue, this practice was questioned. From that time on, the exhibit could be fully accessed, and no damage was done.

We were particularly hoping to see change in opportunities for children to participate and have a voice in decisions that affect them. We feel encouraged that city councillor Jason Farr consulted with children in his ward regarding such safety issues as the location and type of bike lanes to be introduced into their neighbourhoods. He noted: "Their votes held equal weight to the votes of adults ... because kids can identify safety problems with local streets as much as anyone" (as cited in Craggs, 2016). And in April of 2017, a 14-year-old boy got a standing ovation when he presented his views on light rail transit to Hamilton city council (Craggs, 2017). A start.

Learning

We have identified six factors that we believe contributed to the success of this project:

Engaging local experts to participate in developing the charter of rights. This step provided critical information about the UNCRC and Canada's poor track record. Sharing the local learned experience of how the rights of children are perceived negatively by some adults motivated us to come up with a constructive response.

Tapping into the local expertise of artists and educators to support and document the voices of children and youth. The adults involved had to believe in the competence of children to engage in thinking about and communicating about a complex topic, and to support them in doing so.

Having someone to manage resources, timelines, and budgets, deal with unexpected situations, and otherwise keep the project on track. This was essential to completing the charter on time. It helps when that person is invested/engaged in/with the project.

Taking the time needed for a change in thinking to happen. Rushing leads to superficial change. Initially, the city thought this project would take 7 or 8 months. It took 20 months, and we know we could have continued.

Engaging adults and youth from a variety of sectors. Schools and early learning centres are obvious choices when seeking participation of children and youth, but teen parents and marginalized youth are two examples of groups with valuable perspectives that might get overlooked. Conscious effort is required to be inclusive in the broadest way possible. Additional data could be gathered about participants to ensure there is representation of diverse groups.

Listening. Youth clearly told us they did not want to be called children, so the name of the charter was changed to *Hamilton's Charter of Rights of Children and Youth*. We have also developed our ability to listen to other languages

beyond the written and spoken word. The children's drawings contributed immensely to our understandings. We do not know if we were successful in balancing children's perspectives with adult perspectives. Learning how to listen to spoken, written, and visual languages is an ongoing quest. Children's rights lawyer Jeremy Roche (1996) reminds us that, "critically, once we allow children to exercise their right to speak and be heard, we might have to participate in new conversations" (p. 33).

There was also one key area where changes might have improved the charter. In hindsight, we realized that educators were still wrestling with their own understandings of rights and how to engage young children in deep discussion about such an abstract topic. We did not provide actual questions for educators to ask children, and we began to wonder if this had been the best decision when some of the submissions centered around children's *wishes*. We realized as we started the process of seeking validation that perhaps we should have offered a question that everyone could have used for this first endeavour. At that point, we started to ask the children, "**What do you think are the most important things for all children to have and to be able to do?**" That question elicited thoughtful responses. It is our hope that these conversations will be ongoing, that educators and families, coaches and youth leaders, and everyone working with children will engage with them as citizens with rights and will enact the accompanying participatory responsibilities. Critical interrogation of our dominant image of the child as needy, weak, and incapable of grasping a concept as abstract as rights is long overdue.

This is just the beginning...

Before 2015 was out, we were already making plans to increase awareness of the charter, imagining that children could send copies to notable Canadians from a range of backgrounds and experience to ask them to identify the right that resonates the most with them. CKA has turned this "over the dinner table" discussion into a proposal that received funding and was part of a Canada 150 project. The resulting exhibit of responses have been on display at the Art Gallery of Hamilton since November 2017.

We recognize that to honour children's rights, we must create the context in which those rights can be exercised and respected. A new committee has been struck to continue to build awareness of the charter and to embed the rights into policy and practice. We will be able to cite the participatory responsibilities to ask schools, hospitals, organizations, families, and others what has changed and what we need to do differently now that we have the charter.

This project set out to advocate for the rights of all children, including their right to communicate in a way that may be more suitable for them than speaking or writing. Artists have long understood and worked with the idea of art as a language. Loris Malaguzzi's concept of the hundred languages of children (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) has highlighted children's ability to construct meaning and learn, and to communicate complex ideas through graphic representations, movement, music, and other languages, but as Rinaldi (2006) notes, "above all it is a declaration of the equal dignity and importance of all languages, not only writing" (p. 175). We believe the aesthetic experience and expression of ideas in multiple forms, both for participants and audience members, can contribute to the power of captivating and enriching engaged citizenship. We also believe that the charter not only contributes to Hamilton's aspiration to be the best city to raise a child, but also helps it incline toward being the best city in which to BE a child.

Because Ontario's pedagogy for early years (*How Does Learning Happen?*, Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) is based on an articulated view of the child as competent and capable of complex thinking, there should be congruency for educators to respect and advocate for children's rights and to continue the dialogue about children's rights. The Hamilton charter does not supersede laws, but it can serve to open conversations and help us to interrogate our

assumptions about children. To borrow words spoken at the Scottish Civic Forum (2006, as quoted by Kathleen Marshall, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People), "change happens when those who do not usually speak are heard by those who do not usually listen." The participatory process of creating *Hamilton's Charter of Rights of Children and Youth* invited children to speak. It acknowledged their right to be heard. And it gave adults the opportunity to truly listen.

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