

Book Review

Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC: Past, Present and Future

Jenna Gillett-Swan and Vicki Coppock (Eds.)
Oxford, UK: Symposium Books Ltd, 2015

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Readers who are familiar with the field of children's rights literature will feel quite at ease upon opening the edited volume *Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC: Past, Present and Future* (2016). As editors, Gillett-Swan and Coppock have compiled a timely collection of essays that address various aspects of the many children's rights debates that have occurred since the inception of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). After an introductory note on the importance of contextualization for all conversations about children's rights, each of the authors in this text situate their work within the historical and political contexts of their particular locations while also revealing how each piece intersects with the convention itself. Coppock and Gillett-Swan set the stage for this type of contextualization in their introduction by bringing forward some of the more established literature on the topic. Bringing in noted authors as they do is particularly helpful for those new to discussions of children's rights, but serves also as a gentle reminder of the historical and current debates for those who are already well-versed in the field. By specifically highlighting themes that Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie, and Vandeveld (2009) provide in their review of children's rights literature, the editors acknowledge the significance of the work that precedes theirs, and locate firmly their text within the field. In addition, they provide readers who are new to children's rights discussions with an important starting point. At the same time, they show a strong commitment to the understanding of children's rights as dynamic and evolving, requiring educational researchers to be continuously aware and reflective of the many "opportunities and tensions" (p. 14) apparent in the convention document and in children's rights more broadly.

Oddly enough, it may be helpful to begin the journey of this book by reading the epilogue first. Here the editors provide some key messages they see as being fundamental for children's rights work. As they are all relevant, scanning these over-arching themes first may help the reader to recognize them more readily when encountering them in the rest of the text. Aside from this anomaly, the progression of the chapters for this volume is well planned as the overall text gradually brings the reader towards a fuller understanding of the convention itself and the significant debates that have coloured the field since its widespread ratification. By reading through the first half of the book in particular, readers are given a useful theoretical and historical overview of the field of children's rights. Building on the ideas the editors present in the introduction, subsequent authors review literature centred on children's rights theory (I'Anson), historical conceptions of childhood (Phillips), understandings of human rights

education (Thelander), and models of children's participation (Niemi, Kumpulainen, & Lasse). Simply by placing chapters in this order, the editors give the reader a solid base for understanding some of the major debates about children's rights that have occurred over the last three decades.

I'Anson provides a strong historical review of children's rights in chapter 1, noting how theory has been taken up in educational research to date. It is here where the importance of contextualization in children's rights work is most notably underscored. I'Anson recognizes that "children's geographies are complex and cannot be assumed in advance of empirical investigation" (p. 21), aligning himself with others in the field who call for the re-contextualization of children's educational experiences when doing research with young people (Reynaert, Bouverne-de Bie, & Vandevelde, 2012). Another insight that I'Anson brings to the work is the suggestion that the notion of counterpoint would be a helpful, and even generous, alternative to what he sees as a more inflexible and traditional critical perspective. As he puts it, counterpoint would gently offer up alternate views and would "involve valorising the heterogeneity, difference and multiplicity of perspectives that have characterized the field of children's rights research for the past 25 years" (p. 30). This standpoint would also assist with the contextualization of children's experiences by honouring the unique and important contributions that individuals bring to their social circles.

The next two chapters focus on children's rights education in varying degrees and locations. In chapter 2, Phillips highlights article 42 of the convention, which expresses the need for ratifying states to educate their populations, including children, about the document itself. She goes on to describe various international and national initiatives that are designed to enhance children's rights education. In doing so, she provides an interesting glance at how children's rights education is happening globally. At the same time, Phillips recognizes that there is still work to be done, citing teacher education as one potential area for improvement. Thelander expands on the human rights education conversation in her chapter by giving concrete examples of how two middle school teachers in Sweden are attempting to bring rights education into their classrooms on a daily basis. Not only is the illustration she provides useful to practicing teachers, her explanation of the history of international children's rights legislation helps ground her study in the larger global context of children's rights.

Like Thelander's piece, the authors of chapter 4 share examples of how a Finnish teacher incorporates children's rights into her daily educational practices. With a focus on student participation, Niemi, Kumpulainen, and Lasse describe four different participatory rights-based activities that one teacher uses over a period of several years. Admittedly, this chapter feels somewhat bogged down by the many transitions between the examples given. While the projects described could have value for human rights educators at various levels, the structure of the chapter may result in the potential loss of important lessons that could be gleaned from them. In spite of this, the authors' treatment of the various models of youth participation is helpful for those wanting a deeper understanding of this aspect of children's rights. Prior to their description of the research study, the authors explain how article 12 of the convention deals with children's right to participate in affairs that have an impact on them. In citing Hart's (1992), Shier's (2001), and Lundy's (2007) descriptions of youth participation in this piece, the authors give educators and researchers a quick tutorial on how they can strive toward providing meaningful opportunities for students to participate in their own educational experiences.

Lúcio and Ferreira expand on, or perhaps further muddle, this right by noting that children also have the right to non-participation. While their chapter focuses on the risk that times of

austerity pose to the rights of children, the main contribution they bring may be the recognition that Portuguese pre-service teachers are entering the profession with a theoretical understanding of children's rights. Although leaving their education programs with this theoretical understanding may be more than many pre-service teachers gain in other teacher preparation programs, they note that new teachers may experience stress when their theoretical knowledge does not readily translate into practical knowledge as they become solely responsible for a classroom of young students. This potential inability to translate theoretical knowledge into daily practice may render their knowledge of children's rights relatively useless during their initial years of teaching.

In taking on children's right to privacy in chapter 6, Tait and Tambyah provide a thorough description of privacy as a social construct and the impacts that this idea has on children today. In this engaging chapter, the authors make note of article 16 from the convention and the tensions that arise between children and parents due to the outright declaration that children have the right to privacy. They recognize that the child-parent dichotomy that is always hovering near the surface in conversations about children's rights noticeably rears its head any time that children's right to privacy is brought up. They note that schools are not immune to those tensions either, illustrating that school leaders must consider how to balance their students' right to privacy with society's increased obsession with surveillance, moral panic over the protection of children, and a highly litigious response to problems. The editors then pick up on the digital thread laid out in this privacy discussion, and carry it into the final chapter where they describe the opportunities and ethical issues that educational researchers face in this increasingly digitized world. As Gillett-Swan and Coppock point out, children's eager response to new forms of digital media could guide researchers when planning out and conducting educational research with young people. Allowing children to be the driving force for research in this way would align well with notions of children's voice and participation that are consistently championed in children's rights literature.

One possible shortcoming of this book may be its unfailing belief in its own global perspective. Although the text claims to have a global orientation to children's rights, the specific examples of children's rights research in it are nearly all plucked from studies conducted in Europe, save for the two chapters that are situated in Australia (Phillips; Tait & Tambyah). Phillips is the only author in this compilation who makes direct reference to examples from what I'Anson would term the "Minority World" (p. 23). Although her main focus is Australia, she does mention projects from Thailand, Eastern Europe, Mali, and South Africa that help to provide the reader with an overview of the types of human rights education that occur globally. The findings from the other research projects in this work can certainly be extrapolated to other contexts, and the conversation about digital media clearly has an expansive reach. If the editors provided more space in the book, both physically and metaphorically, for authors who are from or who have conducted studies in regions outside of the "Majority World" (I'Anson, p. 23), it would make their claims about the book's global orientation more viable.

While this book is most likely to be picked up by those already fairly well read in the field of children's rights, it will also be helpful for leaders in faculties of education. The book's importance for educational researchers working with children is fairly obvious; however, its call for increased teacher preparation in the area of children's rights education is significant. The ideas and practical examples presented throughout this text should encourage those responsible for teacher education programs to consider how conversations about children's rights can be embedded throughout the courses and projects they require of pre-service educators. The

academy has a vital role to play in educating about children's rights simply by educating new teachers about rights and the convention specifically. This book can be a useful starting point in contemplating how that role might be taken up in teacher preparation programs.

In their final chapter on children's rights in a digital world, Gillett-Swan and Coppock pose the question: "Participation for what?" (p. 149). This is a critical question for educators and researchers alike. When asking children to participate in any activity, it is necessary to consider the reasons for their participation. Is it simply because we, as adults, want them to participate? Is it because we believe they will benefit from it in some meaningful way? Is it because they feel they have something valuable to bring to the experience? The editors and authors of *Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC* not only require their readers to consider such questions, but provide a foundation to help them understand why the questions are necessary for those working in the field of children's rights.

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