

## ***CHILDREN’S RIGHTS, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND THE UNCRC: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE***

### **Review by Benjamin Mallon**

Jenna Gillett-Swan & Vicki Coppock (eds.) (2016) *Children’s Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC: Past, Present and Future*, Oxford: Symposium Books.

The 2014 European Conference on Education Research, organised by the European Educational Research Association, provided a network of members concerned with children’s rights with the opportunity for a discussion of the past, present and future of educational research in Europe. The seven chapters in this edited volume provide a valuable exploration of the themes and debates which emerged from this academic forum. Together, they seek to provide a critical analysis of how, in various contexts, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as adopted by the United Nations in 1989, and ratified by the majority of countries that makeup the international community, has informed past and present educational research and may inform future work.

The introduction to this volume identifies three key themes, derived from existing children’s rights (CR) research, which run throughout this publication. Firstly, there is a focus on the participation of children which is deeply connected to emergent conceptualisations of children as social actors. Secondly, the relationship between children’s rights and family or parental rights is afforded specific attention. The third theme concerns the challenge of connecting the broader theoretical debates on CR to contextualised empirical research.

In the first chapter, John I’Anson provides a historical background to the relationship between educational research and children’s rights. As a legal framework, with universal appeal and inherent obligations, I’Anson identifies that the CRC has been mobilised in extra-legal contexts, and in

doing so raises important implications for educational research, in particular as to how and why such ‘translation’ occurs. Upon this critical foundation, I’Anson provides an analysis of a series of key themes which have dominated educational research in children’s rights, before exploring a number of important tensions. I’Anson makes a series of arguments with relevance to future research practice. In particular, he questions approaches which divorce children and their rights from specific cultural contexts, and makes a compelling argument for the development of more nuanced interpretations of children, childhood and children’s rights. I’Anson also argues for a deeper consideration of what he describes as the ‘neglected articles’ (24), some of which form important themes developed in later chapters. Finally, I’Anson suggests that employing approaches such as ‘counterpoint’ (Brown, 2005) might offer critical perspectives on the limitations but also the strengths of children’s rights research and practice.

The next two chapters focus on children’s rights education. Louise Gwenneth Phillips provides a critical analysis of the various approaches to the promotion of the CRC through Human Rights Education (HRE), including a number of international programmes and national initiatives focused on the promotion of CRC to children. Despite the objective of Article 42 to make ‘principles and provisions of the Convention widely known’ and the recognised intrinsic and foundational benefits of rights-based learning, Phillips argues that the CRC remains relatively unknown by adults and children. Locating this discussion alongside historical and contemporary conceptualisations of childhood, Phillips suggests that conceptions of childhood innocence frame the enactment of the CRC, and provide barriers to the widespread knowing of the CRC. Phillips argues for a shift in attitudes towards children, for developments in teacher education and the creative use of media as a means of promoting the CRC.

In the third chapter, Nina Thelander focuses on another international initiative, the World Programme for Human Rights Education, to provide the conceptual framework for her qualitative exploration of HRE within a Swedish primary school. Focusing on knowledge and skills, values and

attitudes and behaviour, Thelander provides a useful discussion of the developments in policies surrounding children's HRE within an international and regional context. Thelander then explores the perceptions and experiences of two Swedish primary school teachers as they embark on the collaborative planning and eventual implementation of a series of lessons on children's rights. This research provides insight into the challenges faced by teachers in relation to gaining familiarity with the CRC, furthering appreciation of its background and in particular its universality, and developing the skills to integrate themes from the CRC within lessons.

Drawing on aspects of a broader research study, Reeta Niemi, Kristiina Kumplainen and Lasse Lipponen provide an illuminating exploration of the enactment of children's rights to both agency and voice through an action research programme within a Finnish primary school. The research employs an illuminative conceptual framework which considers theoretical models developed to illustrate the various conceptualisations of children's participation. Amongst other approaches, the study developed an innovative methodology which engaged students in participatory classroom practices and provides insight into innovative means of enacting Article 12 (concerned with the child's right to express views in matters which concern them) in relation to classroom and whole-school practice. The chapter considers the enactment of national educational policy within the classroom through children's participation, and suggests how possible future practices could be explored. This chapter also makes important reflections on the constraints to the participation of children with formal education systems, but also on how the space within the Finnish system can provide the opportunity for meaningful engagement with classroom practices which support the enactment of children's rights.

Set against the backdrop of austerity and social and economic hardship for families and children in Portugal, Joana Lúcio and Fernando Ilídio Ferreira explore how children's right to citizenship is limited within situations of social and economic fragility. With a focus on provision, protection and participation, Lúcio and Ferreira explore the perceptions of

pre-service teachers on their role in the civic development of children. Drawing on the narratives of these teachers, Lúcio and Ferreira make important observations about the extent to which teachers are prepared to implement rights-based approaches within the classroom, but also about the potential of a rights focus to illuminate the impact of social and economic vulnerability on children, and the need to strengthen the social and cultural aspects of initial teacher education.

In the penultimate chapter, Gordon Tait and Mallihai Tambyah provide a thought-provoking exploration of Article 16 and children's right to privacy, with a particular focus on the Australian context. Recognising the gaps between the CRC, domestic law and practice, Tait and Tambyah provide an important critical analysis of the right to privacy, firstly in relation to a historical consideration of natural rights, and then to Australian law. Tait and Tambyah then begin an illuminating exploration of children's privacy. Within the context of the home, tensions between privacy and protection come to the fore. Within the school context, limited expectations of student privacy are enacted through physical and data surveillance. Privacy here is further limited by concerns surrounding the sexualisation of children and the threat of legal liability. Tait and Tambyah provide important insights into the complex idea of privacy and reveal the impact of surveillance on childhood. Furthermore, this chapter illustrates how a lack of legal backing presents serious constraints to the enactment of children's right to privacy. Whilst recognising that the UNCRC does not provide a remedy for breaches of this right, Tait and Tambyah make a compelling argument that the UNCRC provides an important lens through which children's right to privacy should be considered and further explored.

In the final chapter of the volume, Jenna Gillett-Swan and Vicki Coppock explore the means by which the UNCRC may shape the methodological aspects of research in children's rights, particularly in relation to rapidly expanding digital technologies which represent important yet complex spaces in the lives of young people both inside and outside of school. Once again provision, participation and protection are recognised as

important components of the conceptual framework and it is around these themes that Gillett-Swan and Coppock explore the relationship between children's rights and digital technologies within an educational context. Where participation rights may be enhanced through digital technologies, a consideration of protection rights, and in certain cases privacy rights, reveals the dominance of approaches which seek to guard against the risks associated with online activity. Within the realm of digital technologies, Gillett-Swan and Coppock provide important grounds for reflection on children's rights, and in particular the relationship between participation and protection. Finally, Gillett-Swan and Coppock offer suggestions of useful frameworks and specific resources which may support educational research to engage with digital technologies in a manner which respects the rights of children. They highlight that whilst the ethical conundrums posed may become increasingly complex, an engagement with these issues may illuminate related themes within wider educational research and may also offer important interpretations of the wider social world.

The conclusion brings together the resonating aspects of each chapter, before the epilogue draws out some of the key findings of educational research in the field of children's rights. These include the value of children's participation and collaboration, the need for integrated yet multiple approaches to children's rights, and the potential of empowerment through the enactment of children's rights in educational research.

In its entirety, the volume provides a critical exploration of a range of themes and intersects with a number of Articles from across the CRC. Although each chapter provides a highly contextualised account of children's rights policy and practice, it should be noted that, unsurprisingly considering the origins of the publication, the geographical diversity is limited to Europe and in one chapter, Australia. Reflections on the sociological study of childhood resonate throughout the volume. Certainly, for those interested in the sociology of children and childhood, this volume may offer important perspectives on the topic through the lens of children's rights.

In pursuing a thematic and contextual focus which transcends the past, present and future the volume asks a great deal from the contributors, yet each author offers those interested in children's rights and associated educational research much in this regard. Through a focus on the past, this edited volume provides an opportunity to engage with how international, national and regional policies have framed the provision of children's rights within specific contexts. In exploring a range of current educational practices which engage with rights, the volume provides some important snapshots of existing approaches to teaching and learning about and for children's rights. With an orientation towards the future, the volume raises important questions as to how educational research, policy and practice can be best developed to support children's rights.

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