

Book and media reviews

The influence of the socio-cultural context on young children's civic learning and action

Phillips, L.G., J. Ritchie, L. Dynevor, J. Lambert, & K. Moroney. (2020). *Young children's community building in action: Embodied, emplaced and relational citizenship*. London and New York: Routledge. 208 pp., GBP£120 (Hardback) ISBN: 9781138369658; GBP£31.49 (eBook) ISBN: 9780429428531

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There is growing recognition and understanding about the active contributions older children can make within their civic space, but how children participate during their earliest years receives less attention. *Young children's community building in action* provides a valuable and critically reflective perspective in this area, with a rich ethnographic study of the active role children, aged between 3 -5, play in shaping their worlds. The work is set within the contexts of an Aboriginal community in Australia and a Māori community in New Zealand.

The research demonstrates that young civic action is shaped by the indigenous values of these communities, with their intrinsic connections to the natural environment and their emphasis on co-existence and prioritisation of children. This view contrasts with historic Western exclusionary notions of childhood and citizenship where children are seen to inhabit the private spaces of play, school and the home, rather than being considered active participants in society with full access to their civil, political and social rights.

The authors argue that the colonialisation of Australia and New Zealand irreversibly damaged indigenous discourses of children and childhood, denying children equal recognition and treatment as a result of being both indigenous and children. This included many children being forced to relinquish their identity and language as a result of colonial schooling designed to discipline them and make them 'civilised.' The authors persuasively demonstrate that whether 'unconscious or blatantly deliberate', the colonial legacy and subsequent discourses of progressivism, counter-colonialism, neoliberalism, and racism continue to marginalise indigenous children, concealing their histories and denying their citizenship enactment. At odds with the values of the indigenous world, colonialisation has had profound and ongoing implications for the inclusion of indigenous children as citizens and opportunities for their civic participation.

To 're-visibility' indigenous children and their communities' values, the authors draw on participatory methodologies to investigate how young children's civic learning and action in early childhood settings are shaped by their communities and wider natural environment. Once the researchers had built a strong level of trust with members of the community, they collaborated with children and teachers, empowering them to take a leading role in the research process. In addition to taking fieldnotes, data-gathering methods included taking audio and video recordings, and supporting children to photograph what they didn't like or wanted to change at their early learning centres. They then discussed the recordings with community members, including the young children who had participated.

Philips et al. bring a refreshingly informed and critical perspective to their research, including an honest reflection on how their histories as teachers and researchers might influence impartiality, and how their original research design was categorised 'according to whitefella constructs'. Their methodology attempts to prevent re-colonisation: children are empowered to take a central role in the research process, and the researchers are responsive when listening, waiting and being open to what emerges during the research process. In doing so, they reduce the implicit power imbalances between children and adults that are too often inherent in research with children, and provide children with the space to actively participate in the research design and data collection processes.

Children's civil and political rights are explicitly guaranteed by international law in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989. In keeping with the responsibility that States have under the CRC to ensure children are subjects of their own rights, there is an increasing recognition that children are capable of influencing decisions affecting them, in accordance with their evolving capacities. However, children in their earliest years are largely excluded from the growing awareness and research on the active role they play in shaping their own lives and the lives of those around them. They are often considered too young and incapable of being active participants in society. *Young children's community*

building in action provides strong evidence that young children actively demonstrate civic learning and action. This study is therefore a useful contribution that enriches our growing understanding of children's participation.

Young children's community building in action broadens our understanding of how socio-cultural histories influence discourses on children and children and addresses a significant gap in exploring young children's civic learning and action. It has two central arguments: a) the civic teaching and learning that begins in early childhood education is likely to result in informed globally active citizens; b) the indigenous principles of living and working with others are valuable for approaches for early childhood development (EDC) in all contexts. These arguments make the book a useful resource for any practitioner, researcher or student of early childhood education and care, in addition to child rights practitioners and policy makers who are influential in creating spaces for children to be seen and heard.