

## Book and media reviews

# Nordic reflections on child rights and childhood: realising sustainability?

Ødegaard, E.E and Borgen, J.S. (Eds). (2021). *Childhood cultures in transformation: 30 years of the UN Convention on the rights of the child in action towards sustainability*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke, Brill NV.

### Reviewed by

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The book examines childhood cultures and children's rights in action towards sustainability. It begins by critically addressing the debate on 'ideals espoused' in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in the context of the shocking reality of the everyday suffering of millions of children caused by 'political calculation'. This uncomfortable paradox continues to be examined through the introductory and second chapters, which argue for a reconceptualisation of the child that reflects cultural diversity and 'an entirely new range of childhood experiences' in the modern world (p. 2). This overarching theme is shared by all contributors; to understand children is to also understand the complex contexts in which they live. Equally important is the necessity to position the child as both a 'being' and a 'becoming', in order to increase his/her agency and authentic enjoyment of rights. The collection mounts a considerable challenge to the idea that rights are universal solutions. It is rather through transformative transdisciplinary research that recognises the ambivalences in childhood cultures, underpinned by respect for children's expertise regarding their own lives that would more effectively correlate with choices that are in their individual best interests.

In chapter 3 Von Bunsdorff concentrates on the cultural rights of infants and suggests the Convention and its emphasis on speech and language is 'symptomatic of an adult centric view

of human beings' and is 'less fitting for children' (pp. 38-39). Instead, an 'existential' approach that 'recognises the embodied, relational and affective dimensions of infant agency' (p. 39) would better support the treatment of infants on equal terms with any other rights holder. Vindhol Evensen also highlights that to be understood is a human right and calls for a better understanding of symbolic communication in order to acknowledge all expressions as fully worthy. A communicative human 'intentionally wants to pass on a message' and it is time to overcome the 'dichotomy of being abled or disabled' (p. 58).

Tuppil Oropilla focuses on how our youngest children's views are addressed, in a systematic review of the literature of intergenerational interactions. While experiences of such interactions are captured from an adult perspective, there is a notable lack of focus on young children's own experiences. Furthermore, research on the topic has been in the fields of health/medical and geriatric studies rather than education and pedagogy, despite the 'need to talk about repercussions of having intentional intergenerational interactions in pedagogical practices' (p.1 09). I was left speechless after reading Lysa's chapter on the 'frustration education' approach to the perceived challenges made by children or 'spoiled little emperors' (p. 121) in contemporary and future Chinese society. The author writes of the experience of taking a kindergarten class to an army base, leaving them alone in a room and telling them they would be staying there rather than returning home to their parents. Such an approach is considered necessary and aligned with the children's best interests, in helping them learn to cope with life's hardships. China's 'single child policy' has resulted in parents 'drowning their children with love' (p. 133) and fostering a type of individualism which in turn leaves a 'risk society' of future generations not having the tools to deal with pressure. Chapter 7 is about kindergarten children's food choices. Describing three feeding styles as 'authoritarian, authoritative and permissive behaviours' (p. 139), the authors argue that the approach that is taken, alongside both the availability and accessibility of food, offers perspectives on how children's freedom to choose their own food is respected under Article 12 in the CRC. The importance of understanding local context is also stressed by Klitgaard Povlsen et al. who critically examine the complexities of research on children's use of media, research that has traditionally focused on 'didactical concerns' (p. 162). In relation to the various interpretations of the term 'in the best interest', Borgen et al. explore how the category of 'children at risk' is problematic in public health policy. Children's active agency under Article 12 is in contention with 'risk reduction' policies that can inadvertently lead to 'risk production' by creating 'new problems, such as standardisation, variation and exclusion' (p. 178). The significance of context is raised again in that 'risk, as it relates to society and children must be understood through context' and provide a detailed analysis of the rhetorical use of concepts in linking political language to political action.

For those looking to understand more about dismantling power relations in their research space, Ylonen explores the concept of ‘aesthetic sublation’—a mode of meaning-making that seeks to degrade an object. The author presents ‘the philosophical potential that disgusting matters have’ (p. 200) to gain insight into another’s culture and makes us think about how we may adopt listening approaches that give greater respect to the rights of the child.

Grindheim writes about the necessity to ‘challenge the dichotomy between agency and structure’ (p. 210) and its bearing on the integration of participation under the CRC. Again, this chapter highlights that agency can be ‘recognised as more than the spoken word’ (p. 214) and is ‘an entanglement of constitutive human and nonhuman elements’ (p. 220). The author also emphasises the necessity to understand that there are multiple actors in a child’s life and that contradictions exist between ‘play and learning’, ‘humans and materials’, and ‘child initiated’ and ‘adult initiated’—contradictions which present challenges for a child’s authentic agency. Pesch explores the intersectionalities of multilingual children’s lives. Generational complexities, such as contrasting views of linguistic practice forms amongst the adults in a child’s life, can act against the best interests of multilingual children. This indicates a need for more research on multilingual children themselves and their own experiences. Karlsson continues with the discussion of children’s participation being a multi-faceted phenomenon and introduces us to the Finnish concept of *osallisuus* (in English, ‘involvement’). To really explore child perspectives and real-life experiences, the author argues for the significance of building a ‘reciprocal participatory culture’ where we are aware that ‘subjectivity, agency, community, participation and power help to create a realm of listening, encountering and sharing’ (p. 256).

The final chapter from Borgen and Ødegaard succinctly concludes by highlighting the paradoxes in global education trends ‘wherein social rules and mandatory tasks are played out as a means of imparting lessons about freedom and independence’ (p. 274). Citing the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) 2030 project’s website (a global policy forum that promotes policies to improve the economic and social well-being of all humans), that calls for an education system where goals are ‘globally informed and locally contextualised’ (OECD, 2018), the authors present ‘a pedagogy of awareness’ which really seems to echo the overall message of this timely book: that educators must firstly connect with their own students and be aware of their experiences and views to create an ideology that more authentically addresses the rights of the child in action towards sustainability.

I recommend this book to readers with a good knowledge of child rights who are looking for a contemporary analytical discussion on the best interest principle and the relevance of local context in its application. I particularly enjoyed the emphasis on how the culture of the local context must first be respected for a child to authentically enjoy his/her rights. Sustainability

as a concept is made up of several interconnected pillars; ecological, economic, political, social and cultural (Pramling Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008). So too are child rights. The focus of this book takes that into account and addresses how we can work towards a fuller realisation of the rights of the child in action towards sustainability.

## References

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