

Book and media reviews

The unfinished business of conceptualising young children's rights in early childhood and educational care settings

Press, F. & Cheeseman, S. (Eds.) (2022). *(Re)conceptualising children's rights in infant-toddler care and education: Transnational conversations*. Cham: Springer. 208 pp., EUR 99.99 (Hardcover) ISBN: 978-3-031-052-17-0; EUR 85.59 (eBook) ISBN: 978-3-031-05218-7.

Reviewed by

Carol Robinson

University of Strathclyde, UK, carol.robinson@strath.ac.uk

(Re)conceptualising children's rights in infant-toddler care and education: Transnational conversations focuses on conceptualising young children's rights in early childhood and educational care (ECEC) settings. Grounded in research, this edited collection makes a positive addition to the sparse range of existing literature in this field. The contributions present varied examples of practice from different international contexts including Australia, Chile, England, Germany, India, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland, the United States and Finland, thus encouraging the expression of a broad range of perspectives on meanings attributed to children's rights in ECEC settings. Throughout the book, children's rights are understood within the context of rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), and each chapter explores how these rights are conceptualised in ECEC settings with infants and toddlers under the age of three.

The chapters are organised so that research areas with a broadly similar focus are grouped together. A wide range of areas is covered in the research-based chapters. These include, but

are not limited to, a number of issues: how well (or otherwise) ECEC educators are prepared for adopting and implementing a child-rights approach; the asymmetries relating to the rights of infant and toddlers and those of adults with responsibility for them; how infants' agency and rights can be encouraged in curriculum planning and influencing their own learning; language development and frameworks suitable for the infant-toddler classroom to support listening to children; and how children can be listened to in non-verbal ways, with a particular focus on children with speech, language and communication needs. The research-based chapters pertaining to each focus area are then followed by a commentary chapter. These commentaries work well in offering additional perspectives on how the rights of young children in ECEC setting are conceptualised and enacted in practice, highlighting synergies across the research findings where relevant.

Through offering new insights and critically engaging with understandings around children's rights and the translation of these into ECEC practice, this book will be invaluable to practitioners working, or preparing to work, in ECEC settings. More broadly, the book will also be relevant to those involved in working with and for children, and to undergraduate and post graduate students who want to explore their own conceptualisation of children's rights and rights-based practice with children.

A major strength of the book is the inclusion of specific nuanced examples of practice drawn from different international contexts, which are then analysed and reflected upon to provide a rich account of how children's rights are understood and enacted in individual ECEC settings. Several of these examples outline momentary episodes of practice which, in the day-to-day busyness of ECEC settings, could easily be overlooked by educators. However, it is these snapshots of practices which, when interrogated, highlight diverse and unique ways in which young children act and express themselves and, crucially, how educators' responses to these actions or expressions can support (or otherwise) acknowledging their rights. Through analysing children's and adults' actions and reactions in these specific moments of practice, authors reflect on how pre-existing conceptualisations of children's rights in ECEC settings have been challenged, and how the process of reconceptualising these rights can involve grappling with complex, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives. Throughout the discussions, the contributions provoke us to think about how future practice can encompass and be sympathetic to adopting a child-rights approach, and the changes that are needed to promote such an approach.

Although the contributions relate to practices from diverse countries and cultural contexts, some common features relating to challenges in adopting a child-rights approach are evident across several of the chapters. For example, two findings which repeatedly surface are: (i) it is not unusual for ECEC educators to have a narrow and partial understanding of children's rights and the UNCRC; and (ii) ECEC educators play a significant role in determining the ways in

which, and the degree to which, very young children can claim their rights in ECEC settings. ECEC educators are often viewed as duty-bearers for the UNCRC and, taken together, these two findings are concerning. They raise questions about how regularly these educators mobilise a limited and partial understanding of children's rights into practice (Robinson et al., 2020). This area needs to be addressed, with urgent consideration given to the measures that need to be in place in different international and cultural contexts to adequately prepare current and future ECEC educators to act as duty bearers under the UNCRC.

A further common finding across chapters relates to the hierarchical power relations that are entrenched within many ECEC educator-child relationships and the implications of these for conceptualising and enacting participation rights with infants and toddlers. Aligned to this, and resonating with all the contributions, is the issue of ethics and the importance of ethical considerations forming an integral component when conceptualising children's rights and the enactment of these in practice.

To conclude, what is apparent from the collection of contributions is that the process of conceptualising and reconceptualising children's rights is an ongoing process that will always remain unfinished. Infants and toddlers will constantly present ECEC educators with a never-ending stream of new and varied situations which will prompt educators to reflect on and challenge their existing conceptions. It is through this perpetual cycle of conceptualisation and reconceptualisation that we develop deeper insights and understandings around children's rights and their enactment in practice. However, just as we must develop practices aimed at listening to children's voices (Robinson & Well, forthcoming), there is a need to constantly revisit and revise understandings in line with new and emerging situations and contexts.

References

- Robinson, C. & Wall, K. (forthcoming). Building a spider's web: an exploration of practices for rights-based education through promoting voice in the early years. In M. Beaton, A. Burke, P. Keskitalo, & T. Turunen (Eds.), *Children's voice and agency in diverse settings: international research and perspectives*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Robinson, C., Quennerstedt, A. & l'Anson, J. (2020). The translation of articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into education legislation. *The Curriculum Journal*, 31 (3), 517-538. <https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.6>
- United Nations (UN) (1989, November 20). *Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*. Adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly Resolution 44/25. Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>