

CHAPTER 43

Epilogue: Imagining Child Rights Futures

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Introduction

Child rights work is an ongoing endeavour across the world. It is undertaken by children, families, advocates, early childhood educators, NGOs, policy makers, and researchers and the *Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights* celebrates and takes stock of that endeavour as it marks the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations (UN), 1989) by illuminating the rights of infants and children younger than eight years. Children's rights are an important path that we can journey on together so that we can all experience better times: they remind us to consider the best ways we can value children. If we respect children's rights, they have the potential to benefit us all now and in the future. In the three decades spanning 1989-2019 almost every country government in the World has acknowledged that children's rights are important. However, that acknowledgement is not universal and even where the importance of children's rights has been recognised by States' ratification of the Convention, that recognition has rarely translated to full enactment, as many of the chapters in this book have revealed.

Our handbook provides a snapshot of a moment in time that marks the 30th anniversary of the Convention, across diverse local and national spaces. Our imaginings for the book were threefold. Firstly, we wanted to acknowledge and celebrate the work that is being undertaken to enact children's rights through policy, practice and research. Secondly, we sought to bring critique to the child rights space and raise questions about the lack of progress for the realisation of rights for many children across the world. *Which children have the opportunities and possibilities to realise their rights?* is an ongoing question and challenge for the United Nations and for signatories to the convention. The distribution of wealth globally and locally means that many children continue to live in poverty resulting in little or no opportunity to access provision, protection and participation rights. Thirdly, we want to pose possibilities and provocations for how progressing child rights might be considered in the future. We are grateful to the children, parents, educators, authors, policymakers, NGOs,

advocates and researchers whose experiences have come together in this book to make our imaginings real. Our handbook is just one book so it cannot cover all the work that has been carried out and continues to be undertaken in the field of young children's rights. This handbook does, however, bring together important current ideas, innovations, practices, policies, research, outputs, and trends that capture and reflect the zeitgeist in young children's rights, three decades after the adoption of the Convention (UN, 1989).

Limitations to Young Children's Rights

The rights of children younger than eight years have tended to be less respected than the rights of older children, young people and adults, and this has been the case for different reasons. Those reasons include - but are not limited to - violence, conflict and their effects, adult imperatives concerned with economics rather than people, assumptions that younger children are always more vulnerable than others, that their size matches their capacity to think and act, and that their pre-verbal communication is a proxy for incapacity. Perhaps most disappointing of all is that the Convention itself marginalises the rights of infants and younger children by empowering adults to make decisions on some children's behalf. The Convention articulates that adults – not the children themselves – should decide the extent of the child's capacity to exercise his or her own rights. The Convention also exhorts adults to decide on behalf of children whether they are 'capable of forming (their) own views freely in all matters affecting' them and third, it empowers adults to decide what 'weight' to give the child's views, 'in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. By assuming that age and maturity are commensurate with capacity, Articles 5 and 12 deny infants and young children full agency as rights holders. Yet, from birth, children *are* rights holders, a point made explicitly, albeit retrospectively, by the United Nations in General Comment 7 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 2005). To secure respect for younger children's rights as 'social actors from birth' (UNCRC, 2005, 2), the assertions in General Comment 7 may need to be incorporated more prominently in a revised Convention.

Evidence and Policy

In the thirty years since the Convention was adopted, the important role of our early life experiences for our own lifetime outcomes and the generations that follow us has been established by powerful research evidence (see, for example, Shonkoff and Richter, 2013). To date, that evidence has led to unprecedented policy focus which has tended to align with economic imperatives, for example, the 2015 United Nations target 4.2 that 'by 2030, all girls

and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'. It is important for us to be mindful that young children's rights appropriately concern many other aspects of their lives that young children may also value at least as much as education; for example, rights to family life, play and freedom of expression (e.g. Articles 9, 13, 31). More research evidence is needed concerning a wider range of aspects of early childhood development to persuade policymakers of the importance of respecting the full range of young children's rights in policy and ensuring that policy translates to practice.

Young Children's Rights: Addressing challenges, imagining futures

The content that we have curated in the handbook indicates that while the UNCRC (UN,1989) is the most ratified global policy document, being a signatory is not enough. It is also important to remember that at the time of writing, the US has still not ratified the UNCRC. Accountability for signatories and UN sanctions is one area that requires urgent attention. Further, consideration also needs to be attended to how individual and collective complaints are undertaken *by* and *for* children. As children and youth organise for climate justice and their future on the planet, against violence in schools and communities, and for more safe spaces to play – indeed for the right to a space to call childhood – giving their views due weight in policy and practice is critical. Neither can we make assumptions that adults are always the best people to gauge young children's capacities.

What are the realities of children who are living in poverty, are homeless or disconnected from education that would enable them to access the UN and complaints processes? As global wealth gaps widen and child poverty continues to grow in the Global North as well as the Global South, provision rights of young children worldwide require more attention and may be used as an advocacy tool by local communities, NGOs and others concerned about child well-being. Neither can protection rights be taken for granted. Young children experience violence on an epidemic scale: of the tens of thousands of children murdered each year across the world, each year, infants and young children aged 0-4 years are twice as likely as other children to be homicide victims (World Health Organisation and International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2006). Young children have also experienced many of the harsh realities of increased armed conflict in recent years in countries including Syria and Yemen, leaving the survivors with lasting symptoms including post-traumatic stress (Save the Children, 2019; Slone and Mann, 2016).

Children crossing borders and seeking asylum – on their own and with families - will continue to need support to ensure how their rights are attended to, particularly as there is a growing discourse of border ‘security’ and ‘protection’ across wealthy nations. Article 22, which focuses on children seeking refugee status, and other provisions of the CRC might be better leveraged in advocating for children in these circumstances. Layered within this discourse is the demonisation of religions that do not sit within narrowing and far Right ideologies and racial vilification through resettlement processes that include children living in institutional settings, separated from families, loss of recognition of citizenship. For example, Australia is exploring not repatriating children in Syrian Refugee camps if their parents were fighting or aligned with ISIS, and or have basic housing, nutrition, clothing and educational needs unmet.

In respect of young children’s participation rights, children were not consulted in the writing of the UNCRC, but they are being listened to by a growing number of researchers, child ombudspersons, municipalities and advocacy groups, as some of the chapters in the participation section attest. Two of the editors of this handbook were involved in an international project (Lundy, et al, 2014) that involved interviewing young children in 5 nations about their views of what should have been included regarding children’s right to education. Children, ages 5 – 9 years old were concerned about education that included animal rights and humane treatment, caring for and about others, preventing bullying, addressing poverty, and understanding refugee issues. Child Friendly Cities have provided creative ways to learn from the views of their youngest citizens for many years and provide examples for other municipalities for ways that children as young as infants and toddlers might be consulted (Saballa, MacNaughton, & Smith, 2008; Smith, Alexander & MacNaughton, 2008).

The rapid growth and diversification of technology will also be an important and in some ways unknown space for the UN going forward to ensure children have access to the digital space to be able to communicate and learn across transnational spaces but also to protect children from child pornography and child trafficking.

As we consider the imagined, yet very real, futures of young children it is important to address larger issues of climate change and climate justice in the current geological era of

human-generated impact on the environment that has been named as the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). Use of this construct signifies that humans are a “global geological force” (Steffen et al, 2007, 614). A powerful example of children taking collective action for the future of their planet is the #FridaysForFuture movement, begun by Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teen whose organizing led to a global movement to demand adult action on climate change. As she stated, “because we children can’t vote but have to go to school, this is a way that I can make my voice heard” (Mitra, 2019, p. 47, as cited in Goebel, 2019). At the time of this writing 2,000 registered #FridaysForFuture events have taken place in 125 countries, on all continents, involving at least 1.6 million people (FridaysForFuture, 2019). While this example focuses primarily on actions of youth, young children worldwide are engaging with an array of activities and advocacy for the sustainability of their communities and world – from saving animals from extinction, to protecting the oceans, to recycling and green practices closer to home.

Notions of the Anthropocene are also tied in early childhood and early childhood research and practice to the more than human (e.g., Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw 2015)– with direct relevance to how young children experience life and their rights, sharing common worlds, beyond human exceptionalism (Taylor, 2017). Young children’s life worlds are interconnected with their physical environment including nature, animals, and material objects. In other words, children’s rights are not freestanding from their wider, more than human experiences and this will likely create growing tensions in emphasis on human/individual rights versus more inclusive and embedded rights going forward.

Conclusion

In capturing the zeitgeist in young children’s rights, our handbook highlights that there is much work still to do three decades after the adoption of the Convention (UN, 1989), if young children’s rights are to be respected. Whilst our handbook showcases a wide range of research in children’s rights, early childhood and related fields, more research evidence is needed to persuade policymakers of the importance of respecting the full range of young children’s rights in policy and ensuring that policy translates to practice. We advocate for a revised Convention which regards children as capable social actors from birth and we hope that future books and resources about young children’s rights will include more contributions from children and will find better ways to accommodate the many varied means young children use express to their thoughts and ideas about matters affecting them. Finally, we call

for the Convention to be universally ratified across the World and for all States to find ways to assume their full responsibilities by ensuring that all children's rights are enacted, including those of our youngest citizens.

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