
Comment

The concept of children as social actors, and the inclusion of their perceptions about their own lives and experiences are essential components in arriving at an understanding of childhood and creating better conditions for it. (Smith, 2013, p. 8)

Children themselves, and their agency and participation in their own childhoods, have been debated, argued for, and repressed over the years. Embedded in understandings of childhood, they have been constructed by what has been known as the sociology of childhood, and by what we now know as childhood studies. In society, these fields examine how children and childhoods are variously controlled, governed, planned for, and formed by adults and the adult gaze. This special issue elevates these aspects of children and their rights, power, and agency. It is an issue in honour of the eminent and important contributions made to conceptions of childhood and to the field of childhood studies (and to many of us personally) by Emeritus Professor Anne B. Smith. Innumerable children, teachers and others who are engaged with young children have been inspired, influenced, and affected by Anne's generosity and her deep and critical insights into children's development and the quality of their lives. Her advocacy for children's rights as citizens and improvements in children's lives and prospects is undoubtedly the inspiration behind the articles in this issue.

Following the call in Anne's opening quote, this issue focuses on children as social actors and on diverse understandings of childhoods in contemporary times. It reflects a multi-disciplinary childhood studies approach, emphasising the social construction

of childhoods and relationships with culture, geography and history, drawing on the moral imperatives of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) (United Nations, 1989). As reflected in Anne's work, the Convention offers a strong foundation for ethical and equitable treatments and views of children and childhoods, particularly in times, as she says, of increasing regulation and a devaluing of childhood (Smith, 2013). This special issue draws particular attention to children's agency, and to their capacity to participate and contribute to shaping their own childhoods. It begins with a tribute by Professor Helen May, "The passing of a great friend, a great scholar and a great advocate for the rights of women and children". We are proud to honour Anne with this issue, and do believe, as John Smith, Anne's husband has commented, that "Anne would have been honored by this publication especially as she wanted her work to be read and where possible used by teachers".

The UNCROC is an explicit framing for three of the six articles in this issue. Sarah Te One, Andrea Jamison, and Mereana Ruri wrote about the parallel reporting done by both the NGO Action for Children and Youth Aotearoa (ACYA) on the New Zealand government's obligations under UNCROC. The article provides a clear explanation of the reporting process and the issues raised for New Zealand within the ACYA report and the Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The issues raised over years make sobering reading—a need "to encourage respect for children's rights, enhance their wellbeing and mitigate the effects of poverty, poor housing and income inequality". Understanding the reporting process offers revelations into how advocates for children's wellbeing and children's citizenry rights might contribute. These authors

urge participants in early childhood education to use the reporting on UNCROC as an advocacy tool.

In two articles, children's participation rights are a focus. Participation rights are to do with children's civil and political rights and mark a significant shift in conceptualising children as citizens. Children are not only to be protected, but are to be empowered to participate in society. The key UNCROC article essential to children's participation rights is Article 12 that:

State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Participation in the research process and "empowering children within childhood research" is advocated by Bissenden and Gunn. They point out that informed assent is recognised as a basic ethical principle in research with children, but few researchers have turned their attention to researching how assent and research understanding is gained when children are very young. Their article drew on observations and videoed episodes of 5-year-old Timmy's interactions with peers, teachers, and researchers taken in a school setting to analyse his comprehension of the research process in which he was included. These authors argue children's right to assent to participate or not to participate needs to be an ongoing process of negotiation and renegotiation in which careful attention is paid to children's verbal and non-verbal communication.

McAnelly and Gaffney introduced their article with UNCROC and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006), each of which refers to the rights of children with disabilities to an inclusive education. Their ethnographic study explored how a kindergarten community supported the "active participation" of a disabled child. "Active participation" has as an aim "that all members meaningfully engage in democratic decision-making processes about the things that affect them in their settings". The article offers a valuable definition

of the nature of "active participation" by identifying the meaning of three kinds of participation in practice—ecological, pedagogic and equitable/inclusive participation—that are important in considering and implementing an inclusive curriculum. Two scenarios from the ethnographic study vividly exemplify these kinds of participation and show how they reinforce and support each other, in combination contributing to "active participation". The conceptualisation of participation generated through this study will offer early childhood communities of practice a useful framework for thinking about and analysing their own inclusive practices.

A childhood studies lens is used by Marek Tesar who used data from an ethnographic study to analyse how participation and power in systems and governance are performed and resisted through a "childhood underground". This fascinating study demonstrated how children in an early childhood centre "became everyday dissidents through their specific play, toys, experiences and stories within their particular childhood undergrounds". To find out more, you will have to read the article. One of the key messages is that adults may initially feel threatened by resistance and by a shift in power relations; but resistance should be understood, accepted, and affirmed, and not suppressed. This article speaks to broader aims of this special issue too, in discussing a research study where children are partners with the academic researchers in driving the study.

Lesley Rameka used kaupapa Māori and sociocultural theoretical frames to explore tuākana/tēina understandings and practices in three Māori, one Samoan, one Tokelau and one Cook Islands early childhood settings. Lesley emphasises that cultural world views frame ideas about children's agency and responsibility. The findings are from a recent TLRI-funded research project, *Te Whatu Kete Mātauranga: Weaving Māori and Pasifika infant and toddler theory and practice in early childhood education (2015–16)*. Her article offers examples of pūrākau (stories) about traditional child rearing practices to illustrate how concepts of tuākana/tēina are embedded in Māori and Pacific communities, how they are enacted and

supported, and the value of these learnings. A strong argument is that providing opportunities for children to learn—to care, to nurture and to take responsibility for others—is a crucial question for early childhood education and society as a whole.

Bryndis Gunnarsdottir and Amanda Bateman explored the use of Conversation Analysis (CA) to "investigate toddlers' social interactions, and in so doing to showcase their capabilities and agency through analysis of their verbal and non-verbal actions". This article argues that by using CA to analyse the details of toddler conversations within the peer group, we can not only discover the complexities and social capabilities of toddlers but also find out what is important to them and how early childhood teachers can support and empower them.

In her most recent book, Anne Smith wrote that "it really matters that we acknowledge that children have rights, and that an acceptance of children's rights makes a difference to the kinds of lives that children lead" (Smith, 2016, p. 3). The articles in this special issue make visible research that highlights possibilities for changed practice and thinking that will contribute to making a difference.

Linda Mitchell (Editor)
Sonja Arndt (Guest editor).

References

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