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EDITORIAL

Happy Anniversary? 30 Years of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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In recent months I have been busy editing with Beth Blue Swadener and Kylie Smith *'The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights'*. Drawing on the work of more than 70 authors and their research across five continents, this exciting project is one among many marking the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on 20th November 2019 (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1989). The breadth and richness of the contributions to *'The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights'* reveal some advances have been made to secure children's rights fully across the World, but they also highlight that a great deal remains to be done, particularly in respect of the rights of children younger than eight years old. This is the case despite the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment 7 (GC7) assertion that young children are 'social actors from the beginning of life' (2005, p. 2) and the robust evidence base for the effects of early childhood experiences for outcomes across the life course (The Lancet, 2016).

The near-universal acceptance across the World that children's rights are a good thing may be regarded as progress in the thirty years since the UNCRC was launched. Every country has ratified the UNCRC, with the exception of the United States of America, and all children whose countries have ratified the UNCRC are rights holders. Perhaps as a consequence, the chapters in *'The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights'* reveal some examples of young children being involved in matters that affect them, for example, in research that may inform provision of services. Nevertheless, the translation of the widespread ratification of the UNCRC into commensurate levels of policy and practice remains a challenge for States Parties (Murray, Swadener and Smith, 2019). The evidence presented by the many authors who contributed chapters to the *'The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights'* suggests that factors that prevent young children from realising their rights include - though are not limited to – (i) tensions between rights, (ii) tensions concerning the present and the future and (iii) tensions around power. For example,

all primary aged children whose countries have ratified the UNCRC have a right to education (OHCHR, 1989, Article 28), and now through the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations (UN) (2015) exhorts governments to ensure that younger children who are not old enough for school ‘have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education’. However, this target is qualified: ‘so that they (younger children) are ready for primary education’, where the UN (2015) proposes they should be targeted further to achieve ‘relevant and effective learning outcomes’, including a ‘minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics’ by the age of 8 years. This is a narrow construction of early education which has strong potential to conflict with the rights of children to education ‘directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential’ (OHCHR, 1989, Article 29), and ‘to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely (and fully) in cultural life and the arts (OHCHR, 1989, Article 31).

Focus on narrow curricula may enable children to pass examinations that might pave their way to entering the workforce in the future. However, as I have argued previously, recruiting children younger than 8 years to a ‘factory’ model such as this may be counter-productive, since it may have adverse effects on wellbeing and health (Murray, 2017). If we focus our attention too rigidly on what might serve children’s futures, we are in danger of overlooking that which may best serve the child now. The existential tension of balancing present and future is also evident when the UN’s notion of children’s ‘*evolving capacities*’ (OHCHR, 1989, Articles 5 and 14) is juxtaposed with its ‘recognition of young children as social actors from the beginning of life with *particular...capacities*’ (UNCRC, 2005, 2). Respecting children’s agency as rights holders from birth – or from conception in some frameworks – means provision of ‘protection, guidance and support’ that empowers *all children* up to the age of 18 to exercise fully their rights (UNCRC, 2005, 2).

Conversely, when children do not experience the provision of ‘protection, guidance and support’ to exercise fully their rights (UNCRC, 2005, 2), their power to do so is transferred to others. This results in lack of compliance with the general principles of the UNCRC that underpin all children’s rights: non-discrimination, the best interest of the child, the child’s right to life, survival and development and the child’s right to be heard (OHCHR, 1989, Articles 2, 3, 6 and 12). When the UNCRC general principles are not realised, neither are the UNCRC articles, and children are more likely to experience poverty, violence, abuse,

marginalisation and detainment, poor - or no - access to appropriate health, education and social services and impoverished opportunities to flourish (Murray et al., 2019).

Addressing any power imbalance that may hinder young children from realising their rights should be an important focus for everyone who spends time with young children, or who is involved in the field of early childhood at any level from policy to practice. The weak implementation of UNCRC over thirty years indicates that a revised version is desirable. Such a revision would benefit from drawing on the authentic views of children and those who live and work with them, rather than a team of Western diplomats such as those who wrote the original version, of whom few ‘...knew much about the real situation of children in any country including their own’ (Milne, 2008: 51). For now, much of the work that may enable young children to enjoy their rights can be done by those who spend time with them, provided the will is there. I am pleased that this final issue of the *International Journal of Early Years Education* 2019 volume features articles that highlight instances of such work.

The first article is by Sigrid Brogaard-Clausen and Sue Robson. *‘Friendships for Wellbeing?: Parents’ and Practitioners’ positioning of young children’s friendships in the evaluation of wellbeing factors’* draws on two questionnaires that were used to elicit the views of practitioners and parents/carers regarding what they believed matters for children’s wellbeing. Based on their findings, Brogaard-Clausen and Robson posit that it would be advantageous for practitioners and parents/carers to consider how they may support children to develop friendships. This outcome aligns with UNCRC Article 15 (OHCHR, 1989), the rights of the child to freedom of association. In the second article in this issue – *‘Before ‘me’ and ‘now’: Developing a sense of identity and historical consciousness at the museum’* - Shirley Wyver and Rosemary Dunn report on a small-scale qualitative study for which they used parent reports and photo-elicitation to explore young children’s understanding of their identities in the context of temporality. Their findings resonate with UNCRC Article 29 ‘education directed to... the development of respect for the child’s...own cultural identity, language and values’ and Article 8 – ‘...the right of the child to preserve his or her identity’ (OHCHR, 1989).

In their article *‘Interactive Health-Hygiene Education for Early Years: The Creation and Evaluation of Learning Resources to Improve Understanding of Handwashing Practice’*, Sapphire Crosby, Katie Laird and Sarah Younie report on their mixed methods study focused

on educational resources to support young children's understanding and engagement with hand hygiene and microbiology. Their work promotes UNCRC Article 24 – 'the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health' and Article 17 – children's right to 'access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health' (OHCHR, 1989). In the fourth article in this issue, Pearly Pei Li Lim and Aziz Bahaiddin consider '*Factors for Consideration to Achieve Contextual Appropriate Physical Environment in Malaysian Preschools*'. This non-empirical study indicates ways that early childhood policymakers, leaders and practitioners may address a range of UNCRC articles focused on the children's rights to education and health (i.e. OHCHR, 1989, Articles 24, 28, 29, 31).

Elizabeth Sproule, Glenda Walsh and Carol McGuinness consider tensions between direct teaching and play based approaches in early childhood pedagogy in their article '*More than Just Play: Picking Out Three Dimensions of a Balanced Early Years Pedagogy*'. Sproule, Walsh and McGuinness present a framework for early childhood practice based on three factors: playfulness, locus of control and the nature of the learning. Their research outcome aligns well with Article 29 – the right of the child to education that is 'directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' - and Article 31 – 'the right of the child...to engage in play' (OHCHR, 1989).

The final two articles in this issue focus on early literacy and resonate with UNCRC Article 28: 'the right of the child to education' (OHCHR, 1989). Pelusa Orellana, Riitta-Liisa Korkeamaki, Eufimia Tafa, Lorraine Jacques and Linda Gambrell present results from their study conducted with children in Chile, Finland, Greece and the United States of America in their article '*Motivation to Read in Grades K – 2: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*'. This transnational team reports gender disparity in reading motivation among young children in two of the four study countries. In their article '*Teachers' Beliefs About Literacy Practices for Young Children in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings*', Hiroo Matsumoto and Miho Tsuneda share findings from their study concerning characteristics of early literacy beliefs held by early childhood education and care teachers in Japan. Among other findings, their work highlights differences between the beliefs of early childhood teachers and primary teachers about early literacy practices.

The articles in this issue highlight work undertaken by practitioners and researchers that promotes young children's rights. They provide valuable exemplars from which all of us who work in the field of early childhood may learn and in this 30th anniversary year of the UNCRC, it is my privilege to commend them to you.

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