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## Book Review:

### ***Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC: Past, Present and Future***

Edited by J. Gillet-Swan & V. Coppock  
Oxford, UK: Symposium Books, 2016

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*Children's Rights, Educational Research and the UNCRC: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Jenna Gillett-Swan and Vicki Coppock, is a welcome and timely addition to the literature pertaining to issues of children's rights. I say welcome and timely because while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) is the most ratified human rights treaty in history, controversy still remains about

the notion of children having rights, particularly in educational contexts (Smith, 2016). For example, although it has been over 25 years since the inception of the UNCRC, disagreement persists regarding the extent to which these rights are embraced and actualized within societies (Coppock & Gillett-Swan, 2016). The impetus for this book came from a roundtable discussion led by the editors at the European Conference on Educational Research in 2014. At this roundtable discussion, participants explored the ways in which the UNCRC had informed, presently informs, and may in the future inform educational research internationally. The papers that subsequently emerged from this discussion were brought together in this edited volume. The book, which seeks to provide international perspectives associated with children's rights in education, comprises seven chapters written by scholars from Australia, Finland, Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

In chapter one, John l'Anson explores some of the ways in which the UNCRC has overlapped with educational research and some of the key themes that have emerged from this "imbrication"—a term used by the author indicating intersection. Specifically, he considers how the UNCRC has informed educational research and will continue to do so. l'Anson identifies a number of tropes or figures of speech that have emerged from educational research in children's rights, such as "voice," "participation," and "ecological perspectives." He explores the orientations of each of these terms in relation to different aspects of children's rights. An interesting discussion of the current directions for research in children's rights includes international comparisons, extending the reach of rights and the proliferation of theory. l'Anson identifies tensions within the field of children's rights research, including those between notions of advocacy and

criticality and translating rights into action. Relatedly, l'Anson notes the conflicting accountability agendas and inconsistent ontologies within children's rights research. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of future orientations for children's rights research.

The next two chapters explore children's rights education. In chapter two, Louise Phillips focuses on the much talked about, but seldom acted upon, Article 42 of the UNCRC. Article 42 stipulates that "States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known by appropriate and active means to adults and children alike" (UNCRC, 1989). As Phillips rightly points out, the UNCRC is not widely known to either children or adults. In this chapter, Phillips explores international actions and programs designed to promote the convention, including UNICEF Child Friendly Schools, UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award, and the World Programme for Human Rights Education. Phillips also explores some broad national initiatives, including curricula and policy, children's commissioners, and media programs for children's rights. In terms of making the UNCRC widely known, Phillips suggests that it will require shifts in attitude toward children, an emphasis on children's rights in teacher education programs, and innovative use of media.

Using a case study in Sweden, the author of chapter three, Nina Thelander, explores the teaching of children's rights, or children's rights education. Children's rights education is made up of education as a human right and education *for* human rights. In this chapter, Thelander addresses the questions of what, why, and how the content of human rights education could be approached in schools. This chapter will be of particular relevance to educators and curriculum developers who wish to develop and

implement human rights education. There is a very useful focus on three aspects of human rights education: knowledge and skills; values, attitudes, and behavior; and actions.

A fundamental principle of the UNCRC is participation and children's rights to express their views on matters that affect them. In chapter four, Teetta Niemi, Kristiina Kumpulainen, and Lasse Lipponen explore this principle through an action research study in one primary school classroom in Helsinki, Finland. While it is beyond the scope of this review to mention all aspects of this project, one feature that caught my eye involved children identifying and ranking classroom practices in relation to how positive they believed they were. The children took photographs of classroom activities, and these photos were uploaded to the class intranet. The children then individually identified and ranked the practices from the most positive to the least positive and provided anonymous narratives for each photo. The children and the teacher subsequently discussed possible actions regarding any issues that had been identified. Other aspects of this action research project included children's participation in school meetings and the use of narrative learning projects, all of which contributed to actualizing children's rights to participation and to expressing their views on matters that affect them.

In chapter five, Joana Lucio and Fernando Ilidio Ferreira discuss children's rights in a context of Portugal's economic austerity measures. They use the rights framework of "provision, protection, and participation" to show how children's rights can be jeopardized in times of economic hardship. The authors provide an analysis of their research into pre-service teachers' perceptions of their role in promoting children's

rights and highlight how the Bologna Process<sup>1</sup>, which has influenced teacher training by way of emphasizing “academic and didactical perspectives” (p. 116), has been detrimental to the more humanistic approaches required for the realization of children’s rights.

Article 16 of the UNCRC (1989) states that “no child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy, family or correspondence, nor to unlawful attack on his or her honor and reputation. The child has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.” In chapter 6, Gordon Tait and Mallihai Tambyah unpack this right showing how, over time, our societies have constricted, rather than expanded, children’s privacy. For example, Tait and Tambyah skillfully demonstrate how 21<sup>st</sup>-century anxieties and priorities within societies (including the societies of families and schools) have bought with them increased surveillance of children and collection of vast amounts of data. The authors provide thought-provoking illustrations of these practices. For example, in families there is a tension between the rights of the child to privacy and the notion of “bad parenting”—“good parents” are aware of the risks that children face, particularly in online environments, and monitor their children accordingly. In school, educators are required to gather volumes of data and report on the academic, social, and behavioral outcomes of their students. There are still no protocols governing who can access these data, or indeed, who owns these data in the first place. Similarly, educators are increasingly concerned about liability and, in response, closely surveil their students or risk being accused of negligence. The authors pose the question of the worth of the right if there is no redress.

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<sup>1</sup> Meetings between ministers of European countries to ensure comparability of higher education qualifications.

The final chapter of the book focuses on the “future” aspect of educational research and the UNCRC (1989). Here, Gillett-Swan and Coppock provide a critical discussion of children’s rights, educational research, and the UNCRC in the digital world. In particular, the authors show how the landscape of children’s rights is changing with the increased use of technology.

This book is engaging and highly readable and will be of interest to all who are concerned for children’s rights. It has international appeal, due in part to the range of contributors from around the world, but also due to the relevance and importance of children’s rights to the international community. At times, I struggled with the overall coherence of the book as, in places, it felt that chapters were quite disparate. However, it is a thoroughly enjoyable and enlightening read that confirms the importance and relevance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the amount of work that still has to be done to ensure that children’s rights are known, respected, and actualized.

## References

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