

Book and media reviews

Revisiting ‘voice’ in early childhood education

Arnott, L. and Wall, K. (Eds.) (2022). *The Theory and Practice of Voice in Early Childhood: An International Exploration*. Abingdon: Routledge. 240pp., £22.99 (Paperback) ISBN: 978-0-36720-109-8; £120.00 (Hardback) ISBN: 978-0-36720-108-1; £20.69 (eBook) ISBN: 978-0-42925-963-0.

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Positioned in a rights-based perspective, *The Theory and Practice of Voice in Early Childhood* offers readers multiple ideas to inspire their own journey in the practice of eliciting voice with young children from birth to 8. The book is structured around eight talking-point posters which illustrate elements of voice work: Voice, Democracy, Culture, Listen with Purpose, Space and Place, Skills and Tools, Enable, and Build Capacity (Wall et al., 2019). These eight factors are subsequently organised into pairs to form four interconnected sections: 1) Voice and democracy; 2) Culture of voice and listening; 3) Spaces, places, skills and tools for voice; and 4) Enabling and building capacity. Each of the sections synthesises theory and practice, moving fluidly from abstract theorisations of voice concepts to concrete case studies illustrating diverse 'voice work' practices in early childhood education. In total, 16 international practice-based case studies with children, including three with babies, are presented. Notably, Anderson and Rautman's case study explores how to involve infants in ethical decision-making processes.

This book adds to the expansive body of literature about children's participation rights in early childhood—frequently articulated as children's 'voices'—that has considered multimodal

forms of communication to ensure that all children, including babies and those with special needs, are recognised as having a voice. By drawing together complex theoretical dialogue with practical ideas for eliciting young children's voices in one book, written in accessible language that will be familiar to those working in early childhood, the authors offer a valuable contribution for the intended practice-based audience. The diversity of authors and multifaceted content, as the authors point out, affords strength to the book through sensitively demonstrating the complexities, nuances and at times tensions in discourses on voice.

In Section 1, Cassidy and Robinson situate the significance of children's voices as an element of participation within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989). Here, they connect voice work to education *for* human rights, attending to the complex and contested constructs of children's agency and capacity. Thereafter, relational understandings of voice in practice continue throughout the narratives. In this respect, two sections are worth highlighting. Arnott and Wall open Section 2 with an exploration of 'the route to a culture of voice' in practice by connecting 'cultures of listening with purpose' and 'cultures of compassion' to relational pedagogies. Blaisdell begins Section 3 with a critique of the limitations of task-based tools for eliciting children's voices, then considers the role of space, place and time in creating opportunities and obstacles for children to express voice. Both chapters emphasise the significance of relationships between adults and children as tools for eliciting voice.

Salient interpretations of voice and power dynamics are interwoven throughout the volume. At times, however, inconsistencies appear across the author's perspectives. In Chapter One, Cassidy and Robinson discuss the need for adults not only to relinquish power in relationships with children but to acknowledge with transparency where power lies in decision-making. An alternative perspective is presented in Chapter Six by Arnott and Wall, who view power as a dynamic feature of social contexts rather than being fixed or being held by one person at a time. They argue, therefore, that addressing power imbalances is dependent on specific adult-child relationships. The editors themselves acknowledge the authors' divergent interpretations but consider this to be an opportunity for the readers to reflect on the complexities of voice and their own positions.

Another important component is Wall and Arnott's consideration of voice work as a cumulative process whereby practitioners bravely initiate their 'voice journey' then work to sustain it through ongoing capacity building with children, adults and communities. The case studies in section 4 illustrate different phases of the journey to embedding 'voice work' in a range of international contexts. By presenting ideas to inspire practitioners to begin and develop their own practice the authors reassure readers that eliciting young children's voices is possible and in doing so contribute to addressing concerns that children's participation has

become somewhat unattainable and intimidating (Lundy, 2018). Helpfully, the book concludes with resources that provoke reflective practice and conversations among practitioners.

Pondering on the meaning of 'voice', Cassidy and Robinson point out that the UNCRC does not reference 'voice' and caution that the right to express views freely as articulated in Article 12 (UN, 1989) could be interpreted as meaning only children's spoken views. However, the same critique can be directed to the application of the term 'voice'. Firstly, this critique overlooks the Committee's recognition of how young children 'communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways' before they communicate through spoken language (UN, 2006, para. 11). Secondly, by reinforcing theories and practices of 'voice' the authors miss an opportunity to reimagine the application of 'voice' within early childhood narratives in a way that could avoid limited interpretations of participation rights that marginalise children's unvoiced forms of expression. Tisdall and Punch (2012) have described the focus on children's 'voice' in childhood studies as a recurring mantra in literature which precludes space for alternative ideas (p. 259). Considering how the content within the book successfully illuminates ways of listening to children from birth, it could have been even more compelling had the authors interrogated or attempted to rephrase the powerful mantra of 'voice'. However, the authors certainly create space for readers to critically reflect on the meaning or reimagining of children's voices for the children they encounter in their specific contexts.

Ultimately, this book provides provocations for professionals working with children from birth to reflect on how to translate complex theories of children's voice into meaningful practice that can contribute to the realisation of education through and for rights in early childhood spaces.

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