

## **Introduction**

**Federico Farini, University of Northampton**

**Angela Scollan, Middlesex University**

### **A celebration of diversity**

This edited volume offers a unique investigation on Early Childhood on a truly global dimension, focusing on how Early Childhood Education and Care policies, practices and discourse is framed in different national contexts such as Kenya, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Japan, Brazil and China, but also England, Wales, Italy, Finland, Ireland, United States, Australia and New Zealand.

What is being introduced here is a collection of contribution that offer innovative insights on the cultural presuppositions of policies, pedagogies and practices shaping Early Childhood Education. This nurtures an intellectual space for reflection, open to researchers, practitioners and all interested in children and education, a space that includes alternative perspectives from those hegemonizing many Western heritage countries.

It can be argued that ‘celebrating diversity’ could be key to the collection, not only due of the great variety of the contexts for the studies presented, but also considering the differentiated disciplinary angles taken by authors, who approach Early Childhood Education and Care from Sociology, History, Pedagogy, Social Work, Communication Studies, Pragmatics, Psychology. Diversity concerns not only contexts and discipline, but also the methodologies applied by the contributors: Discourse Analysis, Ethnography, Conversational Analysis, Phenomenological Narrative Analysis, Case Study Approach, Hermeneutics. It is therefore believed that the presentation lends itself as an excursus in exemplar applications of innovative methodologies to investigation on Early Childhood Education and Care, both as a context for children and adults’ socialisation and an object of the societal discourse on childhood and intergenerational relationships. The volume presents a wealth of research on Early Childhood Education and Care, where empirical contexts are approached from different disciplinary fields, using a varied range of methodologies. Diversity is the characteristic of the volume that informs its identity and mostly contributes to its value for the international debate on and around young children. Nevertheless, the collection combine diversity with a solid intellectual architecture, which makes it a rewarding reading. All contributions, notwithstanding their differences, are firmly

rooted in a common interest, which is scientific and moral at once. Such interest consists in investigating how Early Childhood is positioned in different social contexts. Education and care are used by the authors as a powerful lens to magnify the complex reality of children's participation to their social contexts, uncovering the semantics of childhood that determines the position of children and their relationship with adults.

Of the rich semantics of Early Childhood Education and Care, one aspect is focused upon by the contributors, that is, the space for, and the meaning of, the self-determination of the child, which will be explored across five continents and eleven national contexts. The collection here introduced is therefore a journey into the discourses and practices that define whether, and in which measure, young children are to be constructed within crucial contexts as Education and Care as subjects who make sense of their experiences and make choices according to their judgment.

A journey which rhythm is paced by different languages and cultures, taking the reader on a journey across the constellation of meanings around childhood, and child-adult relationship in the contemporary global society. Across the collection, converging and diverging, expanding and retreating, concepts of power, rights, justice, autonomy, protection, well-being will be touched during the examination of policies, legislation, practices, as well as discourses on childhood, children's rights and intergenerational relationships.

This is not the first work discussing the position of young children in education and in society taking an international perspective. Also, it is not the first work approaching childhood as a social construct, shaped by history, histories and culture(s). However, it is believed that the present book offers an alternative platform for an innovative discussion; the following discussion about this book's specificity compared to recent major works aims to justify our claim to originality.

Whilst Papatheodorou and Moyles (2012) provide a comparative and international look at Early Education and Care, and therefore share the global perspective of this book, the focus of their work is different, being centred on learning, for instance discussing issues that are relevant for teaching, such as the different way to secure children's development of numeracy and literacy skills over different national contexts. This collection takes a different and somehow competing perspective, questioning the very image of the child as a learner positioned at the receiving end of an adult-led transmission of knowledge.

Similar to Papatheodorou and Moyles, the collection edited by Georgeson and Payler (2013) discusses key influential approaches to Early Years Education as well as some less well-known approaches from around the world. Whilst Georgeson and Payler's work is considered very

interesting for its research on different Early Years approaches and principles in their original contexts, the present book aims to diverge from its approach, as expressed by two core methodological choices. The first choice consists in observing the image of the child as reflected by a range of social systems beyond education, such as mass media, healthcare. The second diverging choice consists in taking a more theoretical approach, accompanying the description of practices with their conceptualisation within hegemonic, as well as emerging, theoretical accounts of the position of childhood in society.

At the same time, this book explores a very different cultural landscape from the one occupied by Trawick-Smith's work on Early Childhood development across different countries (2013). Rather than assuming, the collection introduced here contextualises, de-naturalises and ultimately challenges the image of the child as 'becoming', to be approached in light of its progression to maturity within a future-oriented semantics rather than its experiences in the present.

One of the aims pursued by this book consists in favouring greater reflectivity in the discourses that produce the image of the child in a global society. With respect to that aim, the book is ethically aligned to Kroll's collection of contributions on the role of reflection in a variety of educational contexts worldwide (2014). However, whilst Kroll is interested in reflection on practices, particularly in the transformative value of teacher's reflection to promote change in Early Education, the present book utilises a more theoretical and sociologically informed perspective on reflection, targeting not only practices, but also discourses that define the possibilities to think about practices, as well as the meaning of practices against a paradoxical and unstable image of the child.

From a methodological and theoretical point of view, Cregan and Cuthbert (2014) probably offer the closest comparison to this book. Their overall aim consists in following the modern construction of childhood from the late eighteenth century to the emergence of the conception of the normative global child. For this reason it is beyond doubt that their work is cognate to the present collection. However, it is believed that some differences are still apparent. Whilst Cregan and Cuthbert draw on the idea of the child in a wide range of disciplines, this collection does not only discuss different disciplinary discourses but also speaks the language of different disciplines and professional identities via the voice of its range of contributors. In this book, the same idea of multidisciplinary approach is scrutinised, and this is made possible by a unique attribute. Rather than using case studies as an instrument to illustrate a critique to the hegemonic image of the child, as Cregan and Cuthbert do, this collection takes a more grounded approach, using theories and concepts to understand practices and case studies, which are

therefore treated not as exemplary stories but as living social situations, to start from and to be understood, rather than utilised.

Lastly, but most importantly, an overall specificity makes this collection unique: its focus on children's rights rather than children's needs. From a cultural perspective, two discourses on adult-child relationships emerge as possible contexts of diverging meanings of self-determination, both with far-ranging implication for the construction of the image of the child: on the one hand the discourse of children's needs, and on the other hand, the discourse of children's interests. 'Children's needs' is underpinned by a semantics of childhood that individualises children and assumes that things need to be done (by the responsible adults) to and for children to support their development into adulthood. The second discourse, 'Children's interests' is on the contrary underpinned not by an individual but, rather, by a political semantics of childhood, where children are seen as members of a social group who share common interests within some form of relationships with other groups.

It would appear that children's needs and children's interests have contradictory political, social and cultural implications that intersect, reflecting different images of the child. Children's needs presuppose adults' regulation of children who are supposed to be (temporarily) unable to make decisions and make sense of their experiences. If children's need is the context of self-determination, the meaning of self-determination concerns limited spaces where children can exhibit their development and maturity, under adult's control. Opposed to children's need the discourse around children's interests presupposes some degree of agency and the existence of channels through which children can make claims, hold other accountable and express an opinion. Unlike a politics based around children's needs, where children are somehow absent, 'children interests' view children as active and involved, as a group able to make claims at various levels. If children's interest is the framework of self-determination, the meaning of self-determination concerns the recognition of the voices of the children as a shaping force both at the level of interactions and policy-making.

This contribution, differently from the majority of works contributing to the discourse *in*, as well as *on*, Early Education and Care firmly establishes itself in the cultural world of children's interests (but see, as a very recent, theory- rather than practice- oriented exception, the collection edited by Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018). Whether by highlighting practices and discourses underpinned by the discourse on children interests, or by criticizing practices and discourses stemming from the discourse of children's needs, this book brings to the fore the voices of the children in the present, with its interests, agendas and rights to self-determination.

Most of the collected chapters will introduce the reader to a range of investigations concerned with rights-based pedagogies and policies, always accompanied with an interest in the exploration of the meaning of children's rights in the context of the researches. Other chapters will present critical reviews of the position of childhood in different societies, and its connection with the representation of children's rights, regarding the meaning of the right of self-determination. The collection hosts two clusters of chapters complementing each other, combining the analysis of hegemonic discourses with the investigation of policies and practices, always based on solid theoretical foundations. The rich variety of the contributions is controlled within the boundaries of a clear argument, by the common thread they share, that is, an interest in the analysis of the dense semantic node where intergenerational relationships, representation of childhood and the meaning children's self-determination converge.

How do different cultures of education and care shape the semantics of children's self-determination, generating different spaces and configurations for right-based pedagogies and policies?

An answer to such complex, although pivotal, question is presented by each individual contribution. All contributions combined as one, shed light on the semantics of children's self-determination within Early Childhood Education and Care, on a truly global dimension. Adult-child interactions, pedagogical practices and planning, policies and legislation, discourses on Childhood and children's rights are analysed in the different chapters, inviting the reader to question the different semantics of children's self-determination underpinning it.

A presupposition of this collection, as well as a presupposition of each individual chapter, concerns the need to position self-determination within the historical and social frameworks that define the hegemonic discourse on childhood in different contexts. However, all contributions congregate in demonstrating how the discourse on childhood in society, both in the sense of the position of the child within the social structure and the societal semantic of childhood, is marked by: 1) a legal, political and cultural movement towards, albeit often ambiguous, from the recognition of the child as an autonomous subject in society, 2) a cultural shift from the concept of child as 'becoming', perceived as an empty box to be filled with knowledge to the concept of child as a 'being' in the here and now, as an 'active agent' with a role in influencing educational practices and, 3) changing and often contradictory policies that define spaces for adult-children interactions, fluctuating between the semantic of the child as 'being' and the child as 'becoming' with important implication for the empirical experiences of childhood. The latter point refers to some degree of ambiguity in political decision-making

and organisational planning and strategy in education, which is believed mirrors the changing contours of the status of childhood in society.

Within this collection, practices and discourses are investigated considering their relationship with children's self-determination, in particular regarding Early Childhood Education and Care. Whilst the importance of other social systems, first the family, is recognised (many of the contributions collected consider the complex relationships between education and family), this book focuses on the position of the child and its self-determination within social dimensions where organisational realities are very important. The implication of this choice is that all chapters will consider, alongside the many facets of child-adult relationship either regarding practices or discourses, the morphogenetic role of professional identities, organisational arrangements and of course the political dimension.

Since James' pioneering plea (1983) for a more inclusive socialisation where children have an active role in their own development, the idea of the child as an 'active' agent in different social contexts has moved from a minority to a hegemonic position (Osler and Starkey, 2010). Not lastly due to the mainstream centrality acquired by the constructivist perspective first advanced by scholars such as Luckman and Berger (1991), whereby each individual makes sense of its own world at the intersection of social semantic (structure) and individual intuition (in the Weberian sense of *Verstehen*), the western myth of the development of personality presupposing a chronology from immaturity to maturity has appeared more and more controversial (for non-western representation of the relationship between age and personality see, for instance, the classical anthropological account of Mead, 1930/2001, but also the more recent account by Montgomery, 2006).

During the XX century, philosophers (James, 1983; Arendt, 1993) as well as psychologists (Gordon, 1974; Britzman, 2007) have been arguing that socialisation is a process in which the child has inevitably an active role. Criticising traditional theories of the child's mind as an 'empty box' to be filled with knowledge and moral values, scholars have been advocating for the support of children's autonomy, competence and relatedness which are key characteristics of self-determination theories (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Ryan and Deci 2000; Gagne and Deci, 2005). Wyness (2012a) is one authoritative voice, but not the only voice, announcing the crisis of modern childhood as defined in the late Enlightenment, a crisis defined by the shift towards the idea of the child as an agent to be heard, listened to, and engaged with.

Whilst in the 1970s scholars like Holt (1974) and Farson (1974) were advocating children's liberation from the domination and control of adults, therefore signaling the persistence of modern conceptualisations of the child as a 'becoming', three decades later Alderson (2006,

2010) and Monk (2004) were in the position to argue that society in the XXI century views children as competent rights holders rather than passive recipients. Stating that children are nowadays recognised as competent citizens and participants, demanding adults to become competent in dealing with this cultural evolution, Sinclair (2004), draws a picture of the dominant discourse on childhood in education. This cultural shift has already reached far beyond the academic debate. Within the British context only, public pleas from the British Children's Commissioner (2015) and landmark policies such as the Children and Families Act (2014) advocate for adults to actively hear and engage with what has been heard.

The apparent triumph of the concept of child as 'being' is reflected, in the education system by the success of rights-based pedagogies interested in the promotion of young children's participation and agency (Murray and Hallett, 2000; Vanderbroeck and Bouverne-de Bie, 2006; Walsh, 2011; Baraldi, 2015). Rights-based pedagogies are promoted at the political level, both globally, underpinning the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), and locally, because right-based pedagogies can be found at local, national and international levels of policy and practice.

Sociological research has recognised the turn towards children's active role in their own socialisation as a defining characteristic of the discourse on childhood in the late 20th century (James, Prout and Jenks, 1998; Vanderstraeten, 2003; Lawy and Biesta, 2006; Baraldi, 2014). Since the early 1990s, scholars from the field of childhood studies have shown a growing concern with the theoretical conceptualization of children's active participation in society, including not only primary socialisation but also, with an increasing interest, secondary education in organised contexts (Elfer, 2004; Robson, 2006; Moss, 2015). Within this cultural framework, educating children is understood as socialising children towards an 'understanding of their own competencies' (Matthews 2003: 274) rather than the achievements of state-of-development, either institutionalised in politically-defined curricula or related to educators' expectations. Socialisation refers therefore to socialising children to a sense of responsibility and skills in planning, designing, monitoring and managing social contexts rather than to a one-way adaptation to normative expectations.

The success of this new vision of children as social agents has changed the cultural presuppositions of educational practices, inviting education to use children's self-expression as a resource for reflective learning. With a reminder to the title of the book, childhood is the mirror used by education to look at itself, and education is the mirror through which children look at the reflection of their status in their social worlds. Self-determination is unavoidable a reflective concept, and its meaning depend on how it is heard, interacted with and decoded. A

common thread over the whole collection is that reflective nature of self-determination. The meaning of self-determination, and therefore the semantics of childhood influencing a rights-based approach calls into question the position of the child as well as the position of the adult in the educational relationship, professional identities and practice, what Schon (1987), albeit within a teacher-centered framework, defines 'artistry'.

The idea of children's self-determination as the underpinning concept of right-based pedagogies interested in promoting child's responsibility and skills in managing social contexts, needs to be problematised considering those social contexts where right-based pedagogy should be implemented. This does not only concern national or cultural differences, but also the specificity of different social systems. Education, Social Care, the Family, Religion, Economy, Science: these can be understood as complementary and competing discourses that produces different social semantics of childhood and children's rights. This collection, again with some degree of uniqueness, considers this further layer of social complexity over the all series of contributes.

It has been argued that levels and forms of children's participation and identity construction depend on the type of socio-cultural context of children's lives (Lansdown 2010). Socio-cultural contexts can determine two types of problems for the exercise of children's self-determination. Within organised educational contexts, the relationship between self-determination vis- à-vis the structural determinants of the society is particularly complex (Prout, 2003; Holdsworth, 2004; Blanchet-Cohen & Rainbow, 2006; Holland & O'Neill, 2006; James & James, 2009). The first aspect to be considered would be the nature of adult-child relationship, following the examples offered by most of the chapters in this collection. Archard (1993) highlights the centrality of the role of adults in right-based pedagogies, suggesting that a child's internal drivers and desired level of participation are framed around adult power and use of social language cues; this conclusion is reinforced by more recent research by Lundy and Cook-Sather (2016). James and James (2004) recognise how social and cultural perception influenced by policy and legislation determine how childhood is perceived whilst from a more theoretical position. The aspects illustrated above determine the meanings of children's participation, and how a child can actively voice or participate in the social contexts, including situations where adults determine if protection overrides participation (Leonard, 2016). Scholars within the intellectual field of childhood studies have shown a growing concern with the theoretical conceptualization of children's active participation in society, including their own education, questioning if adults are advocating what they think a child needs or can do in

comparison to or what a child actually needs or wants to do (Alderson, 2006; Wyness, 2012a, 2012b; Jones and Walker, 2011).

A reflective nature of self-determination clearly emerges in this collection, in line with a rich tradition. Alderson and Morrow (2011) offers examples of children's competence and decision-making struggling to fit within adult structures. Presenting case-studies related to scientific research, Alderson and Morrow illustrate that adults may be influenced in their decision-making about the space and place of self-determination not by child's competence but, rather, by their observation of a child's competency. This is an 'act-of-knowing' that is clearly positioned at the intersection between legal and ethical discourses, professional identities and the need to consider risk, control and accountability. The recognition of self-determination is therefore a genuinely reflective act: self-determination is seen through the child who sees its status through its social experiences, which include the adult's look through the mirror of childhood.

A collection aiming to further the discussion around self-determination cannot exempt itself from a discussion on the position of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) within the discourses and practices of Early Education and Care. It is argued here that the competing discourses on the position of childhood in society are vividly represented in the multifaceted legal work underpinning the 1989 UNCRC.

The Convention globally strives to change the way children are treated and protected from neglect, abuse and exploitation and although the Convention is a set of rights for children, it regards human rights, providing children with a distinct set of rights instead of as passive objects of care and charity (UNICEF, 2015). For this reason, the UNCRC appears to entail a children's interest perspective, with a stark contrast with the children's need approach of the 1959 Declaration.

As rights-holders, children are expected to know and have full access to their rights whilst being responsible to respect the rights of others. However, at the same time, within the UNCRC it is recognised the need for adults to understand that children as rights bearers does not suggest those responsible for children should 'push' children to make choices they are not yet ready to make (UNICEF, 2015).

The UNCRC has surely become a global frame of reference for children's rights in legal, professional and political terms. However, the UNCRC also offers evidence of the ambiguity of children's rights, where welfare rights and self-determination rights are juxtaposed in a somehow contradictory way. It is therefore advisable to explore the Convention in further detail.

Article 3 introduces the concept of child's 'best interests', meaning that a child's interests are to be defined by the adult, for the child. Here, with some level of linguistic ambiguity, 'interest' is used to frame the rights of the child within a 'children needs' discourse. Best interests are not defined and advocate from the child for the child (and the adult) but are defined by the adult for the child. Article 3 therefore seems to push the UNCRC towards the welfare rights model within the children's needs framework.

The concept of best interest was already present in the 1959 Declaration, where it was the ethical pillar of the whole UN resolution. By stating in its preamble that 'the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth', the 1959 Declaration firmly established itself within the discourse of children's needs. Whilst incorporating such discourse, particularly in the article 3, the UNCRC presents a more complex, but also contradictory, cultural framework than the Declaration. Diverging from the semantics of childhood enshrined in article 3, the well-researched sequence of articles 12 to 15 are known to be the articles introducing self-determination. The article 12 is surely the most studied discussed and criticised:

*States 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*

Article 12 is generally known as one that is most concerned with self-determination, advancing an undertaking that children are active subjects of rights and that their involvement and views are to be given due weight and recognition. According to this article, the child's right to express his or her views is not undermined in cases of inability of the child to communicate his or her views (albeit such limitations could be placed upon children with disabilities).

At the same time, the article 12 can be the object of a series of critical considerations from the self-determination advocacy viewpoint. For instance, while article 12 places emphasis on the 'opportunity (for the child) to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child', the drive towards child's autonomy is somehow diluted in a model of tutorship, by the specification that the child's voice (interestingly, the child is conceptualised as an abstract category, rather than recognising the plurality of children's voices) can be raised 'via a representative or an appropriate body'. The potential impact of the tutorship model to prevent expression and voice of the child is not only a theoretical preoccupation. However, the main caveat in article 12 for the advocated of a strong version of children's self-determination is that

self-determination is not an attribute of all children but it should be conceded by adults according to their assessment of the child's development. In the same vein, the voice of the child should be listened given 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. It is therefore possible to observe that whilst article 12 is concerned with right of the child to have its voice heard, it is easy to recognise the conditional nature of children's self-determination presented in it. There is not an inviolable right to be heard for the child; rather, the power of the child's voice depends on the adult's assessment of the child's capacities and competences, measured against standards set by adults. This emerges with some evidence within UNICEF's (2015) interpretation and summary of article 12, where it is clearly stated that the child's right of self-determination should not undermine the right, and duty, of the adult towards protection of the child. Here, in a nutshell, but with powerful eloquence, the ambiguity of the discourses and practices concerning children's self-determination that is explored and discussed by the collected contributions, is presented.

The ambiguities in the UNCRC about the meaning of children's participation suggests that children self-determination is a controversial concept and a challenge to define depending on how an adult may judge or perceive rights. Burr (2004) argues that the hegemonic western discourse on childhood, which impregnated the UNCRC, is built on diverging and ultimately incompatible concepts of protection and participation, that is, two conflicting ideologies regarding how children access their rights under adult control. However, Alderson (2006) offer a more nuanced analysis of the dualism between protection and participation, when stating that that sound knowledge of both protection and participation is required to ensure children have equality towards active citizenship whilst also having a right to be protected.

The UNCRC lends itself as an example of the challenge to self-determination of the child which is entailed in the enduring idea that children's competence should be checked by adults before the right of self-determination can be conceded. Changes made are underpinned via legal structures reinforced by moral and ethical codes that can be used by adults to reinforce self-selected or inherited gatekeeping roles and identities. Wyness (2012a) recognises children have few rights regarding self-determination within dominant authoritative and paternalist weaker versions of rights-based perspectives because children are viewed as reliant on adults to bring about change regarding rights-based shifts for and on their behalf.

At the sametime it is here argued that, notwithstanding the evident contradictions and conceptual weakness, the theme of participation in the UNCRC had a pivotal role in bringing up the emerging concept of children's self-determination at the center of the political agenda.

It is not by chance that research and literature on children's self-determination has boomed at the time of the UNCRC promulgation, as well as in its long aftermath.

It might be possible to affirm that the echo of the UNCRC resonates in this collection too. Its limitations do not allow overlooking the Convention's important role, which consists in the introduction of the concept of self-determination as a right of the child as a social group, adding a new dimension to the traditional framework of children's needs of protection, implicating adult's control over children's lives and choices.

In addition to the analysis of the intrinsic limitations of the UNCRC, it is necessary to add a cultural analysis to understand how political, historical, social and ideological variables may impact on how children's rights, participation and self-determination are perceived and contextualised. An important contribution is offered by James and James (2004), who recognise a circular relationship between social and cultural perceptions on the one hand, and policy and legislation on the other, mutually influencing each other in the dynamic definition of the semantics of childhood. According to James and James' analysis, based on the scrutiny of numerous children's right policies, how children are perceived as rights holders and active agents by adults within educational environments while influenced by inherited structures will impact upon spaces children access and self-determination.

Freeman (1983) and, two decades later, Fortin (2003) look further at moral and legal rights to debate if children can be full rights holders legally, ethically and morally questioning who has a choice as to 'if' and 'when' children can exercise their rights. Both researches point to the need of conceptual clarifications regarding the status of children self-determination, showing that the legal debate has encountered some difficulties in approaching children's right beyond the principle of protection and welfare rights. A more critical position is taken by Handely (2005), who identifies it is the child's competence, age and abilities that are primarily considered by adults within a protective framework that subsequently influences participation and listening levels. Freeman (2011) suggests the persistence of the hegemonic position of pedagogical adult-centered strands, nurtured by the idea that giving children choice represent a risk because of the pressure this will place upon them, in professional contexts shaped by discourses on responsibility, accountability and competence levels. The latter analysis is also presented by research on the medical or psychological models of childhood as discussed by Alderson (2006) and Monk (2004), who converge in observing how medicine as well as psychology are prudent in promoting, or even recognising, a child's full capacity, competences, capabilities or abilities as active or equal participants.

Against these perspectives painting an adult-centered picture of inter-generational relationships, Hendley (2005) argues that promoting a child's rights to participate is not about handing over decisions to children without due regard to age or competence. She suggests there is indeed a fine line and balance required in practice to recognise dominant childhoods constructions, discourse, frames and competences when considering the dynamic relationship between protection for the child and active participation and decision-making of the child, across complex and dynamic life-worlds.

Solidly linked to the scholarly discussion and political framework sketched above as an introduction to the historical and cultural environment of the collection, the contributions in the book, stem from different disciplinary and methodological angles, to discuss how expectations about children's competence and considerations of their responsibility inform curricula provisions, policies, practices, research and discourse in different national contexts.

The complexity of the meaning of children rights and how they inform practices in different social systems is offered to the reader by analysis that are solidly grounded in empirical research. Each chapter discusses practices and discourses in and around Early Childhood Education and Care, adding to the descriptive dimension innovative interpretations of the cultural foundations of such practices and discourses. One after another, the contributions accompany the reader in the observation of the intersection between inter-generational relationship, social structures, frames of culture, moral codes and scientific knowledge. The hegemonic discourse on childhood in the social sciences understand children as actively engaged in making sense of their social worlds, interacting with, and construct, social and physical environments. But this is the discourse that defines a limited field of scientific enquiry, generally known as 'the new sociology of childhood'; in which measure such hegemony extends to current practices and discourse in contexts beyond Western social sciences?

### **The chapters in the book**

Eighteen chapters cooperate in producing a multifaceted and complex answer to the question introduced at the end of the previous section. The contribution offered by the chapters composing the book is therefore important, because the answer to the question concerning the alignment between the hegemonic discourse on childhood in the social sciences and current practices and discourse alternative to the scientific system defines the understanding of the position of childhood in the global society. The collected contributions answer the question by approaching children self-determination from a range of theoretical perspectives, to tackle crucial topics such as: How is children self-determination understood in different national

contexts? What is the meaning of self-determination and its relationship with Early Childhood education? How is the paradoxical relationship between educational intention and children's agency conceptualised in discourses and practices? How does children's agency influence the educational contexts and discourses on children's capability?

The editors have decided to organise the collection around two themes, 'practices' and 'discourse'. In the same measure of any other form of order, this decision is a simplification, aimed to collate contributions that share the primary object of research. However, it is important to highlight that each contribution presents provoking and informed connections between the practices examined and the discourse on childhood that frames them or, conversely, between the discourse explored and its materialisation in practices, policies, legislation, social intervention.

The first theme, 'practices' is inaugurated by a contribution from Claudio Baraldi. The chapter concerns the observation of children's active participation in interactions with peers and teachers discussing if, and under which circumstances, children's participation means also children's agency. Baraldi argues that in educational activities, agency can be made visible as attribution to children of rights and responsibilities in producing knowledge, i.e. as epistemic authority. Moving from this theoretical perspective, the chapter analyses how children's epistemic authority is construed in interactions occurring in a pre-school setting in the Italian town of Reggio Emilia, presenting ways in which adults can enhance agency in Early Childhood education.

The following chapter in the 'practices' themes propose another exploration of educational practices, discussing co-operative problem solving through dialogue and mutual recognition in a Japanese kindergarten. Miyamoto focuses his analytical eye on the nature of children's involvement in democratic practices during class activities. In particular, Miyamoto explores educational situations called 'democratic meetings', which are part of the Japanese pedagogical planning, aimed to provide children with the opportunity to care for, expand and share via dialogue each other's experiences within decisional processes. Based on the idea that every child has agency and can be understood as an equal participant in everyday life, democratic meetings represent a pedagogical tool to promote self-determination of young children. In line with Baraldi's conclusion, across thousands of kilometres and different cultures of education, Miyamoto argues that the construction of children as owners of epistemic authority is a necessary condition for the promotion of children's self-determination.

Accompanying the reader to an exciting intellectual journey across continents, the third component of the theme 'practices' takes the reader back to Europe, albeit leaping from the

Mediterranean to Scandinavia. Offering a strong sense of continuity with Miyamoto's chapter, the contribution delivered by Kinos and Rosqvist is interested in democratic practices with children. In the Finnish settings of Kinos and Rosqvist's research, democratic decision-making concerns the design of the physical environments in preschool settings, within a project interested in promoting children's participation to the assessment and improvement of indoor facilities of two schools. In particular, the authors focus on the form of participation of children having Special Education Needs, observing their interaction with peers, adults and the Finnish tradition of participatory methods. Based on ethnographic methods, the contribution assesses the participatory project using theories of critical pedagogy of place, concepts of agency as well as our work on child-initiated pedagogy. Despite potential shortcomings of the approach, the case can be argued to reflect a genuine self-determined participation of preschool aged children with a special need. Kinos and Rosqvist's analysis is even more poignant as it focuses on the participation of children with special education needs, challenging established truths about their position in education and society.

The concept of self-determination as constructed in social relationships introduces a crucial question concerning the measure in which adults are equipped to recognise children's determination to claim authorship of narratives channelling knowledges and experiences. Regarding this important question, the fourth chapter, authored by Sarah Vipond, presents the results of an action-research that took place in an English nursery. With a unique choice, the chapter is interested in unintended consequences of purposive educational action. In particular, the chapter discusses the unintended consequences of an action-research project aimed to implementing a shift in practice from making observations of children's learning using still photography to sharing and discussing video vignettes with parents. Vipond shows that, whilst the action-research was meant to develop an understanding of children's thinking and learning, practitioners' analysis of video did not support the interpretation of children's thinking only, uncovering that play itself can be medium of communication, channeling children's claims of the status of legitimate experts in their own worlds. Linking with Baraldi and Miyamoto's position, the findings of her research allow Vipond to argue for the importance of *learning* how to give consideration not only to children's learning, but also to the status of children as owners and authors of knowledge, who use play to share and celebrate their expertise and knowledge. The fifth chapter of the 'practice' again invites the reader to cross continents and cultures. Contributing to a powerfully emerging discussion around children's status as legitimate producers of knowledge that characterises the first part of the collection, Martin Needham presents a case study of policy and practice in Kazakhstan, where the educational culture is

caught in an unresolved tension between two competing models of learning. The first model is based on the idea that allowing children greater control of some of their activities promotes personal responsibility and self-control, leading to longer lasting benefits resulting from preschool experiences. The other model considers learning as an individualised absorption of teacher transmitted information rather than as a distributed act of thinking. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews with practitioners in the preschool environment are used to explore how national standards policy documents interact with underlying beliefs about the nature of learning. Needham's findings suggest that, as in other countries, the concept of child-led pedagogy may be inhibited by existing classroom-based expectations of children's participation.

Self-determination as authorship of knowledge, self-determination as narration of knowledge, self-determination within culturally0-structures intergeneration and intra-generational relationships. The emerging intellectual narrative characterising the 'practice' section of the collection is clearly mirrored by the contribution offered by Scollan, presenting the concept of *hybrid-transitions* as a tool to explore transitions between the digital and non-digital worlds as spaces at the intersection of young children's agency and the limitations imposed by their position in society. In particular, data collected during the observation of digital practices in a pre-kindergarten in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester is discussed by Scollan to suggest that children's agency may be expressed in form of authorship of narratives based on personal memories and knowledge, evolving into collective interlaced narrative during peer-interactions.

The eight chapter of the 'practices' theme, presented by Carolyn Morris, examines how two class-teachers frame and manage classroom learning within curricular activities in a Welsh school. Morris' chapter further enriches the discussion on the measure in which children's status with regard to the production and communication of knowledge can be observed as the condition of a meaningful form of self-determination in the education system and beyond.

Morris' contribution illustrates situations where children contribute to the plurality and richness of discourses in the classroom, arguing that group work allows far more peer interaction which is observed as a condition for the development of the classroom as a socio-cultural context promoting children's trust and agency. As for the previous chapters, the position of the adult is discussed and appreciated in its relevance: Morris shows that the interaction with teachers has a dramatic impact on children's attitudes towards risk-taking and claims to epistemic authority.

The final chapter of the 'practices' section provides an ideal close to the section, as well as a solid bridge to the 'discourses' section. Duhn's contribution is two-fold. Firstly, it is concerned with practices, as it discusses an empirical interaction between a baby and an educator observed in the context of a research project in New Zealand based on ethnographic methods. Duhn's analysis supports her argumentation that that adult's perception of very young children's capabilities both limits and opens possibilities for the child's agency. This is an important further contribution around the role of the adult in creating a positive, or a hostile, environment for children's self-determination. Secondly, the chapters leads to the section more concerned with discourse analytical discussions, by providing an overview of the academic discourses around infant and toddler participation to outline current understandings, and their possibilities and limitations for very young children's self-determination in early childhood education.

This collection is structured by two themes, 'practices' and 'discourses'. It is believed that the introduction to the contribution composing the 'practices' section represents an already clear evidence of the complex and intriguing nature of the collection, where analysis of practices is discussed within sophisticated theoretical framework contributing to conceptual advances, and discourse analytical essays keep an eye on practices, lending themselves to be utilised as tools to decipher children-self-determination within adult-child relationships against their historical and cultural backgrounds.

The specificity of the contributions to the 'discourses' theme consists in tackling the language and the social semantics mediated by language, defining childhood and adult-child relationships in a variety of international contexts. Children's rights becomes a significant case study for the intersection of discourses and practices in Education and Care, therefore complementing the preceding theme.

The chapter inaugurating the second theme is contributed by Fay Hadley and Liz Rouse. It is believed that the reader will find itself in agreement with Hadley and Rouse's claim that the chapter successfully unpacks how children's rights are positioned in Australian Early Childhood Education. Based on a solid argumentation, the reader will be also invited to reflect on the child's position within the current parent-teacher partnership discourse in a country, Australia, which is generally considered as leader about Early Education and Care. The authors argue that the hegemonic discourse posits Early Childhood educators in front of complex responsibility in their work with children, firstly due to the need to balance the ever-increasing interconnecting network of policy frameworks, societal expectations of what a 'good' early

education and care program looks like, parental expectations, anxieties and concerns and supporting all children's rights to be heard creates potentially competing tensions.

Complexity, increasing pressures on professional, ambiguities between a discourse on children's self-determination and duty of care, the potential competition between professional identities and families within the framework of working in partnership. The themes introduced by Hadley and Rouse are further expanded by the second chapter in the 'discourses' section, investigating how powerful discourses on childhood impact upon the social space where young children and social workers interact in Irish Social Work. Scollan and McNeill discuss how the individualistic rights-based approach to social work and education advanced by State legislation is intertwined with the enduring semantics of children as subordinated units within the family. With help of a mixed methodology, combining qualitative interviews with professional and document analysis, Scollan and McNeill assess and reflect upon the ambiguous status of the voices of children within Irish discourses in Early Education and Social Work, where two competing semantics, children's self-determination and protection of the child underpinned policies and legislation.

The third chapter expands on the topic of the ambiguous status of children, the reader to a critical analysis of the discourse on childhood informing the contested approach to children's self-determination in a major Eastern African country, the Republic of Kenya. Based on ethnographic experiences and document analysis, Corrado and Robertson argue that whilst Kenyan children are actively engaged in the local communities, exercising agency in managing their social worlds. Notwithstanding a long tradition in the minority world has been portraying a generic construct of the 'African child' as one who is disadvantaged and marginalized, the authors demonstrate that such construct is not representative of the lived reality of the children in Kenyan communities which can be lost in the translation of children's position in society within a hegemonic, and ethnocentric, truth on childhood. In the conclusion, the chapter invites to re-assessed the position of the 'African Child' through ethnography and robust education. Crossing continents and oceans, the fourth chapter in the second thematic area is particularly interesting as O'Donoughe presents a rich review of documents and debates previously accessible only to Portuguese-speaking readers to investigate the position of disabled young children in the discourse around Early Years Education and Care in Brazil. Enriching the discussion across the whole 'discourses' theme, this contribution returns to the topic of a contested status of what the societal discourse would irrevocably categorise as 'deficit childhood'. Whilst the National Plan for Early Childhood (2010) and the National Education Plan (2014) put forward strategies to improve the quality of and increased participation in

education for all Brazilians, little focus has been historically placed on the rights of disabled children in particular, O'Donoghue argues, with regard to children with cognitive impairments, traditionally condemned to *fracasso escolar* (academic failure). However, the chapter demonstrates that national shocks like the Zika disease, with its induced microcephaly in newborns and landmark events like the 2016 Paralympic Games may influence social and cultural attitudes towards disability, favouring a new discourse on a fully inclusive, rather than merely 'integrative', model of Early Education.

In the same measure of all previous chapters, the fifth in the 'discourses' collection, authored by Miguel and Carolina Santillan Torres Torija, identifies and analyses some degree of ambiguity in the discourse on childhood, which appears to emerge when the focus is shifted towards children who are positioned at the margin of the social systems. The chapter examines the case of México, discussing how self-determination of the child, which is at the center of current legislation and curricular provision is intertwined with a semantics of marginalization and social inadequacy developed around one of the most vulnerable groups in Mexican society, "indigenous" or native children. The authors invite the reader to consider the limitation that legislative developments introducing rights-based pedagogies and social intervention centered on the voices of the children may encounter, in situations of enduring ethnic- or cultural-based inequalities.

The sixth chapter in the section tackles the topic of children's status in the societal discourse regarding the recognition of self-determination vis-à-vis their citizenship status. A case study within the education system is chosen by the author, who discusses that education to British Values, which is now a statutory duty for English Early Education settings is underpinned by a concept of citizenship as a learning outcome projected in the future. Based on a dense document analytical review of educational policies and curricula, the author argues that Early Education in England, as exemplified by education to British Values, is approached as a crucial phase for a healthy development of the child as a citizen in the future. Citizenship is pursued as the future outcome of a learning process designed and led by the adult, rather than experienced by children in the 'here and now' of their educational journey. The chapter suggests that a consequence of the paradoxical status of citizenship in Early Education is that discourse on education to citizenship, as well as children's citizenship in education, are absorbed by technical concerns about the implementation of pedagogical means. This entails neglecting that citizenship is experienced and articulated as a practice embedded within the day-to-day reality of children as of adults.

The seventh chapter is offered by Te One and Welsh Sauni, who describe their work with a uniquely Aotearoa New Zealand group, the Māori Wardens. The authors introduce a new perspective, ideally closing the section whilst paving the way for further methodological experimentations. Rather than analysing the discourse on childhood and on children's rights, Te One and Welsh Sauni research on children's experiences of learning about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in the context of their lived experiences of childhood. Produces through an intense ethnographic immersion, the data presented in the chapter supports two key messages; first, that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is not currently promulgated effectively to promote and protect children's rights; and second, that Māori Wardens are in a unique position to advocate for the 'hard-to-reach'. They witness first hand, the impacts of harsh, neo-liberal economic ideology on whānau, where, as is revealed, they recognise the unrealised potential of principle articles of the CRC.

The eight chapter, closing the 'discourses' section, is a contribution from Fengling Tang addressing the transformation of Chinese early childhood provision towards child-centredness occurred since 1992, in the aftermath of China's Reform and Opening-Up policy. Whilst children's rights have been addressed as part of the Chinese government efforts especially starting with the China Children Development Plan in the 1990s, a thorough documentary analysis of key policy documents and existing research in the last three decades support the argument that pressure from school learning restricts scope and depth of children's participation outside the school contexts whilst the urban-rural divide as a long-term issue needs to be tackled in order to widen children's participation in China.

It is genuinely believed that, at the end of its intellectual journey across the fifteen chapters composing this edited collection, which it is hoped will represent the beginning of new, unforeseen, intellectual explorations, the reader will have the opportunity to engage with different perspectives questioning the intersection between the semantics of children's rights, practices and discourses in very diverse contexts. At the same time, all the chapters invite to a critical reflection on how the different meanings of childhood underpinning discourses, policies and practices in different social systems and contexts nurture different semantics of children's self-determination and its positioning in relation to adulthood.

All chapters, individually and as a collection, cooperate to define an innovative approach to children's self-determination as a reflective construction. Throughout the volume, children's self-determination is not simply discussed as implicated in specific constructions of childhood in Education and Care. Rather, self-determination is observed as a dynamic concept where

those constructions interact, collide, and mutually influence each other, both in discourses but also in social interactions.

Following the intellectual, critical, engage and commitment to the rights of the child, path traced by the contributions to the volume, the reader is invited to actively engage with international perspectives on the relationship between the social position of childhood and the self-determination of the child in the late modern society, as magnified through the lenses of the semantics of self-determinations emerging at the intersection of macro and micro socio-cultural process in the different contexts investigated in the collection.

Reflectivity can be promoted by widening the semantic horizon with new knowledge and perspectives; this is one of the noblest characteristics of dialogical communication: inviting the interlocutor to question its knowledge, as well as the same presuppositions of its knowledge, their thinking and unspoken assumptions (Bohm, 1996). The collection aims to promote reflectivity: such aim is written in its title; such aim steers each chapter towards investing the hegemonic discourses on children's position in society, and the practices built upon them, as well as the practices that seem to contradict them. Within this intellectual, but also ethical commitment, all contributors have accepted the editor's invitation to provide some prompts in conclusion of their chapters to promote and support readers reflection on intellectual links between chapters on the one hand and further investigation and research on the other hand. Scholarly activity, professional practices, social activism, engaged citizenship, advocacy for children's rights: the reflective prompts offered by the authors aims to further strengthen the potential of the collection to make a difference in their social worlds for the readers.

This volume aims to provoke students, scholars, professionals and all readers interested in the changing position of Early Childhood in society to be inquisitive and sceptical, reflective and critical, in their theorizing and in their practice, actively building and transforming their knowledge. The international research on the meanings of children's self-determination, and their relationship with Early Childhood Education and Care presented in the collection can be used as a tool for reflection and self-reflection, uncovering tacit assumptions, ideological positions and social conventions that, seen but unnoticed, set the foundation of practice, research and theorizing on childhood.

A final consideration. Across the contributions to the collection, an epistemological approach vigorously emerges. The mirror is raised, and the observation of the categories used to describe the construction of childhood and children's rights is now possible. A reflection that allows us to distinguish not only childhood from the lives of children, but also the deconstruction(s) of childhood as an adult endeavour from the lives of children. This is the inauguration of a

possible journey towards the recognition of children's childhoods. Although any step forward will require important methodological and ethical investment, the editors would like to give the journey a name: 'Childrensology', toward a study of childhood owned by children for children

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