

Chapter 17

Commentary on Chapters 15 and 16



Contradictions and Challenges About Enacting Infant-Toddler Rights in Diverse Political, Cultural and Policy Contexts

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Abstract Writing from vastly different political, cultural and policy contexts, Malcolm (Chap. 15) and Palkhiwala and Mevawalla (Chap. 16) question current thinking about the nature and enactment of children’s rights. Both chapters stress the need for critical reflection by early childhood educators upon the culture and ethos of early learning settings, their own practice, and young children’s experiences. Their research challenges the status quo of infant-toddler education and care in their respective countries, pressing a case for radical thinking to effect changes in practice. For Malcolm, the impetus for change has been from the ‘top down’, led by recent government policy in Scotland that “has never before placed so much emphasis on children’s rights.” In contrast, for Palkhiwala and Mevawalla, the lack of government policy and “the increasing privatisation of the Indian education system,” particularly in highly disadvantaged communities, require change to be led from the ‘bottom up’. Together, these two chapters highlight the importance of leadership (‘from the top’ or ‘from the bottom’) as a driver of rights-based change.

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Writing from vastly different political, cultural and policy contexts, Palkhiwala and Mevawalla (Chap. 15), and Malcolm (Chap. 16), question current thinking about the nature and enactment of children’s rights. Both chapters stress the need for critical reflection by early childhood educators upon the culture and ethos of early learning settings, their own practice, and young children’s experiences. Their research challenges the status quo of infant-toddler education and care in their respective

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countries, pressing a case for radical thinking to effect changes in practice. For Malcolm, the impetus for change has been from the *top down*, led by recent government policy in Scotland that “has never before placed so much emphasis on children’s rights”. Performance indicators for the Scottish government include significant investment in early learning and childcare, enacted financially (through funded places for 2-year-old children) and “with time, energy and love”. As Malcolm’s work shows, putting *love* (a word that provokes resistance and fear) at the “heart of policy discourse” asks educators to embrace radical new thinking. In contrast, for Palkhiwala and Mevawalla, the lack of government policy and “the increasing privatisation of the Indian education system”, particularly in highly disadvantaged communities, require change to be led from the *bottom up*. They question the educational norms and teaching practices evidenced in the real experiences of infants and toddlers, and propose a radical re-think through a process of educators “developing shared understandings of concepts like equity, respect, fairness and dignity from *within* communities”.

As an advocate for building secure attachment relationships in infant-toddler education and care (Harrison, 2003), a co-leader of the team that was contracted to develop and trial Australia’s Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009; Sumsion et al., 2009), and a teacher who has done voluntary work in a number of early education programs for highly disadvantaged children in India, the parallel challenges raised by these two chapters set off a powerful process of critical reflection in my own mind. Malcolm’s chapter reminded me of the robust debate that took place within the team writing the EYLF about an early draft of the document that included the word *loving* to describe secure relationships between educators and children. There was a view that the phrase *loving relationship* could provoke discomfort, while other descriptors such as *warm, caring, secure, trusting, nurturing, responsive, respectful* and *reciprocal* relationships were more acceptable. Similarly, the Scottish educators interviewed by Malcolm had “reservations” and “uncomfortable feelings” about “demonstrating and talking about love”, and found terms like *nurturing* and *secure* to be more acceptable than *loving* to describe their relationships with infants. Like Malcolm, I believe it is important to acknowledge the “loving exchange between children and carers” that builds a secure relationship, and I recognise that to achieve this requires addressing current contradictions. For example, Davis and Dunn’s (2018) analyses show that the EYLF and other curriculum frameworks from England and New Zealand include very little recognition of the emotional aspects of educator–infant relationships, but Malcolm argues that building and supporting secure attachments between educators and young children is an emotional process. Citing Zeedyk (2013), she clarifies the contradiction, stating that “love is what we are talking about when we are talking about attachment” (p. 22).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) recognises that “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” (p. 3). The challenge Malcolm poses for early childhood contexts is that environments, such as childcare centres, preschools and supported

playgroups, where infants and toddlers spent significant amounts of time away from the family, should also promote “an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” to support the child’s full and harmonious development. Her work with Scottish educators alerts us to tensions that are captured in a comment made by The Honourable Michael Kirby, a highly respected and celebrated Australian advocate for human rights:

There is a tendency in the Anglo-Saxon world to not say the L word. I wish I had told my parents how much I loved them and expressed my gratitude to my teachers. (Kirby, 2018, n.p.)

Kirby’s personal reflections remind us of the child’s need to express love. Equally, Malcolm’s writings, by “asking if children are being provided the love needed to allow them to love others”, make it clear that the right to loving relationships in early education settings is about children’s rights to give as well as to receive love. Her Framework for Love-led Practice provides a means to ensure that government policy and practice guidelines are enabled for educators whose leadership can enact real change in the acknowledgement of and support for infants’ and toddlers’ right to love in early education and care settings.

In stark contrast to the Scottish and Australian policy contexts, Palkhiwala and Mevawalla’s provocative chapter describes a socio-political context of social and economic disadvantage that characteristically applies a “banking model of education, in which educators are intending to pass on knowledge” and expecting children “to internalise the ways of thinking, being and doing within the system”. Their work raises complex, contradictory and challenging questions about what is meant by “children’s right to education” in diverse contexts. The detailed descriptions they provide of teachers and 2-year-old children in an educational playgroup operated by a non-government organisation in Mumbai, were reminiscent of my experiences of visiting preschools and schools in impoverished rural and city areas of India. These programs were provided and funded by internationally supported charities, staffed by local educators and attended by children whose families could not afford government-run services. The classrooms were small and none had any equipment, apart from small slates and a few pieces of chalk. The education program relied on teacher-led activities with children singing songs and rhymes in English, Hindi and the local language, copying letters, numbers and pictures, reciting prayers and chanting the national anthem. The children had outside time for playing, but again with very little equipment. Despite these limitations, the most notable impression I came away with was the high expectations for the children, and the very high value put on education by staff and families.

Drawing on a very thorough review of relevant literature, and applying critical pedagogy theory, Palkhiwala and Mevawalla’s interpretations of their observations of the playgroup activities and their conversations with the educators highlight the complexities and contradictions of infant-toddler rights in this context. They ask readers to reflect on the actualisation of the UNCRC in relation to “cultural nuances”, which in India include restrictions on access to education related to “caste, class, gender, disability and other factors”, and for children living in slum communities,

“unstable and impermanent living arrangements”. Palkhiwala and Mevawalla urge us to direct our interpretations (or mis-interpretations) of children’s rights in these disadvantaged contexts away from an “*individual* focus on rights” towards “a *collective* focus on the responsibilities that children and educators have towards each other within the context of their societies”. But, they also acknowledge that the shift to a collective focus can result in the exclusion of individual children and inequities “in meeting the rights of *all* children”. One of the challenges Palkhiwala and Mevawalla identify is achieving a greater awareness of the UNCRC amongst teachers and parents, including children’s rights to participation and expression. Another is acknowledging that children’s right to participation may be “incompatible with adult interpretations of the best interests of children”.

In seeking avenues for teachers to support children, families and communities to work towards rights-informed practice, Palkhiwala and Mevawalla emphasise the importance of recognising that it is “systems that need to be changed, rather than children themselves”. Yet, to do so implies radical re-thinking on the part of the teachers who may themselves be products of an entrenched and unwieldy education system. To address this inherent contradiction requires critical reflection or, citing Freire (1970), “critical consciousness” on the part of teachers to recognise and question the ways that dominant practices in education may work to “perpetuate systematic and structural injustices”. Palkhiwala and Mevawalla recommend that teachers listen to children, families and communities “in order to develop a shared culture of rights” that is grounded in the reality of children’s lives and provides a basis for co-constructing and realising children’s rights.

Together, the authors of these two chapters highlight the importance of leadership as a driver of children’s rights. Malcolm’s chapter provides an example of how leading from *the top*, through government policy, can challenge educators’ thinking and needs practical supports for effective translation into improvements for children and communities. Palkhiwala and Mevawalla’s chapter shows how leading from *the bottom* through working within communities can challenge the status quo and actively promote changes in understandings and enactments of children’s rights.

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