

Chapter 4

Commentary on Chapters 2 and 3



Our Future Teachers: Duty Bearers, Activists and Advocates

Linda Mitchell

Both Long (Chap. 2), and Pardo and Jadue-Roa (Chap. 3), are concerned with initial teacher education for children's rights in early childhood education and care (ECEC). This is an under-researched area, and their chapters offer valuable insights and challenges for tertiary institutions and teacher educators in preparing ECEC students for teaching as *duty-bearers* under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The chapter by Pardo and Jadue-Roa begins with a useful explanation of the concept of *duty-bearers* – and the role of the state as legal duty-bearer and of non-state entities, including teachers, as moral duty-bearers. These authors clearly establish the need for child rights education (CRE) to have a central place in initial teacher education. While the original UNCRC (1989) does not specifically mention ECEC, the UNCRC (2006) General Comment No. 7, following its concern that the reports of States Parties offered very little information on the rights of the young child, pointed out that “young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention and that early childhood is a critical period for the realization of these rights” (Clause 1). It specifically argued for trained staff and professional training to enable “sound, up-to-date theoretical and practical understanding about children's rights and development” (Clause 23). As Pardo and Jadue-Roa note, the UNICEF *Child Rights Education Toolkit* (2014) also emphasised embedding rights in the curricula and training of professionals working with young children. Yet despite widespread acknowledgement that CRE needs to be embedded in teacher education, internationally a child rights approach is only sometimes

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present in ECEC teacher education courses. So the focus of both chapters helps to highlight an issue that is of significant importance and adds to the small body of literature on this topic.

Pardo and Jadue-Roa draw on their findings from a 2014 study of a child rights approach to undergraduate teacher education programs in Chile, and they also offer recommendations on ways in which ECEC programs can be strengthened to embed a child rights approach into initial teacher education curricula. Long discusses an empirical study of meanings that a group of undergraduate students in a tertiary institution in Ireland ascribe to children's rights. ECEC practices that illuminate these views are discussed. In this commentary, I comment on the contested relationship between rights and responsibilities, the value of exploring rights bearers' duties to support student teachers as *advocate activists*, and generally discuss the value of further research in this area.

Writing of *Aistear*, the Irish national curriculum framework, Long highlights "a clear curriculum entitlement for a situated children's rights education". She is critical, however, of the interweaving of rights and responsibilities as in the opening statement: "Help me to learn about my rights and responsibilities. Model fairness, justice and respect when you interact with me" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2014, p. 8). Long portrays this language as problematic; she sees in this statement a suggestion that rights are conditional and dependent on children fulfilling certain responsibilities, a position that UNICEF (2014) warns strongly against. Yet this is not the way I read *Aistear's* curriculum statement, which seems consistent with UNICEF's (2014) view that

If rights are to be taught alongside 'responsibilities', this must be framed in terms of actions or attitudes needed to respect other people's rights, not used as a punitive method of controlling children's behaviour through the threatened 'withdrawal' of rights. (p. 76)

However, the relationship between rights and responsibilities is a contested issue that came through also in the teacher educator interview responses in Pardo and Jadue-Roa's chapter on Chile. Here, some program heads were resistant to the idea of rights, portraying these as fostering children who are "individualistic and defiant of any authority". An example from New Zealand's ECE curriculum and writings from a Māori perspective offer some new thinking that could shed further light on this relationship between rights and responsibilities. New Zealand's curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 2017) makes explicit reference to children's rights to protection, provision (e.g. equitable access) and participation.

This curriculum acknowledges that all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives. These rights align closely with the concept of mana.¹

¹ *Mana*: The power of being, authority, prestige, spiritual power, authority, status and control.

This section [*A curriculum for all children*] sets out expectations of inclusive and responsive practice that acknowledges diversity. A fundamental expectation is that each service will offer a curriculum that recognises these rights and enables the active participation of all children, including those who may need additional learning support. (p. 12)

References to a child's rights to agency are included in sections related to infants, toddlers and young children. In these sections, responsibilities are portrayed as interwoven with rights, e.g. "[Children] are given opportunities to discuss their feelings and negotiate on rights, fairness, expectations and justice" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 34).

The New Zealand curriculum is underpinned by four principles that are intended to guide decision making and practice. The principle of *Empowerment/Whakamana* is particularly relevant to this discussion of rights and responsibilities.

This principle means that every child will experience an empowering curriculum that recognises and enhances their mana and supports them to enhance the mana of others. Viewed from a Māori perspective, all children are born with mana inherited from their tīpuna.² Mana is the power of being and must be upheld and enhanced. (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 18)

Māori academic Wally Penetito (2009) writes of the *creative tension* between individualism and collectivism and asserts that neither can be taken for granted: "Where one's *mana ake* (unique individualism) is encouraged to develop, *rangatiratanga* (self-determination) for the collective identity is also facilitated" (p. 23). They fully develop with each other in a *relational totality*. The discussion of a child rights approach could fruitfully explore these ideas of relational totality connecting individual rights and collective responsibility.

This book is about children's rights in infant-toddler ECEC settings. Both the chapters discussed in this commentary placed predominant focus on participation rights. Views of children and childhood are socially constructed, and there has been a long-held tendency to view children as passive recipients of adult care and actions, particularly infants and toddlers. This view presents children as dependent on the goodwill of adults, and is necessarily disempowering. Understanding discourses about children and childhood contributes to an ability to deconstruct and explain them, and so become more critical of them. In this respect, a child rights approach that recognises and supports children's agency, offers a welcome alternative to discourses and practices that are limiting. Recognising the competence, views and interests of infants and toddlers is complex and challenging. But, as Smith (2016) has argued, young children "have a great deal of understanding of the people, places, and routines in their lives, make choices and communicate their feelings and wishes, well before they can talk" (p. 47). It requires that relationships are warm, sensitive and responsive, that teachers notice, recognise and respond to children's interests so they can scaffold and extend them, and that teachers are open to finding out about the funds of knowledge that reside in families.

² *Tīpuna*: Ancestors; forebears.

Another crucial aspect of a child rights approach within initial teacher education programs is around provision of ECEC. This was not explored to any extent in the two chapters. While governments have a legal duty to provide access to quality ECEC for all children, as the chapter writers acknowledged, there are moral duties for teachers to advocate for quality ECEC and to speak out as advocates when access is limited, and practices are poor quality and disempowering. In a neoliberal world, the market rather than the state has become the provider of ECEC with subsequent inequities in access and quality (Press et al., 2018). From a child rights perspective, within ECEC initial teacher education programs, CRE needs to include teacher educators as duty-bearers developing within their initial teacher education provision, as well as providing an understanding of and commitment to teachers as *activist-advocates*.

Research evidence on initial teacher education for children's rights is very limited. In my view, the two chapters raise questions and challenges that will contribute to thoughtful consideration of ways in which initial teacher education providers can contribute to implementing children's rights in ECEC. Importantly, as Pardo and Jadue-Roa advocate, an integrated approach to mainstreaming children's rights into curricula for initial teacher education needs to occur, and it should involve key government bodies such as ministries of education.

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