

## Chapter 7

# Commentary on Chapters 5 and 6



## How Does a Contract Between the Generations Guide Our Work as Researchers or Educators?

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**Abstract** This is a commentary on chapter by Salamon and Palaiologou (Chap. 5) and by Cheeseman, Press and Sumsion (Chap. 6). Both chapters explore the question of infants' and toddlers' rights and participation by complementing each other. The chapters pinpoint the main challenges and offer alternative vocabularies for addressing, both theoretically and in practice, infants' and toddlers' rights to participation. The commentary concurs with the authors about the importance of supporting the ways of understanding "listening to children" beyond verbal communication and proposing ways of building educational practice as a space where infants and toddlers can take the lead. Thus, we found that the chapters convincingly argue for an ethical stance in education, as well as in research, that embraces uncertainties, unpredictability and responsiveness (ethical praxis in Salamon and Palaiologou; Levinasian encounter in Cheeseman, Press and Sumsion)—and provide powerful insights into what these require from adults.

**Keywords** Infants' participation · Children's rights · Ethics/relational ethics/lived ethics · Encounter · Listening to children · Adult–child hierarchies

It is difficult nowadays to imagine research or educational practice with children that does not announce a serious commitment to children's rights and participation. However, as Salamon and Palaiologou (Chap. 5), and Cheeseman, Press and Sumsion (Chap. 6) point out, these concepts also generate tensions and dilemmas when applied to infants and toddlers. The task of writing a commentary on these authors' contributions proved difficult: both were so rich, analytical and intellectually stimulating that, when reading them, we simply nodded in silent agreement. Although both approach the question of rights and participation from different

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perspectives, they have much in common as well as complementing each other. They pinpoint the main challenges and offer alternative vocabularies for addressing, both theoretically and in practice, children's rights to participation. Importantly, they support ways of understanding "listening to children" beyond verbal communication and propose ways of building educational (and research) practice as a space where infants and toddlers can take the lead. They convincingly argue for an ethical stance in education and research that embraces uncertainties, unpredictability and responsiveness (*ethical praxis* in Salamon and Palaiologou; Levinasian *encounter* in Cheeseman, Press and Sumsion)—and provide powerful insights into what these require from adults.

## Children's Rights and the Importance of *Listening*

Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them. (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been ratified in almost every country and thus applies to most professionals who work with children. In the UNCRC, adults, in accord with the generational order, have the role and responsibility of ensuring that young children's rights are realised. It is here that some of the tensions discussed by Salamon and Palaiologou arise. They note asymmetries that should be considered when attempting to understand and implement children's rights: one is the divide between human and children's rights, and the other is the priority (often) given to protection or provision, owing to the vulnerabilities associated with infants. Alderson (2010) offers one possible approach to addressing these asymmetries. While it has been claimed that, unlike adults, children do not possess liberty rights (autonomy and freedom), Alderson argues that freedom rights and participation are at the core of respecting a child's person, worth and dignity, and addresses social, economic and political means of promoting these rights. The right to protection or provision cannot be realised if children are not listened to or if they have no influence on how their rights to protection or provision are implemented (Alderson, 2010). Hence, children should "have a say" in matters concerning them, as it is only by "listening to" children that we can respect them as rights holders and acknowledge their dignity, acquire knowledge of their unique and personal preferences and interests, and thus contribute to ensuring their diverse rights are respected. The importance of these chapters lies in their contribution to articulating and envisioning how this very process of *listening* might be realised with infants and toddlers.

## Different Frames in Encounters

All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it. (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*)

Both chapters led us to reflect on educational versus research practices with children. While *ethical praxis* (Salamon and Palaiologou) applies to both, we would like to probe their differences as socio-spatial and ethical practices. Research practices are constrained by discourses, ideals, values, aims, resources and objectives that differ from those governing educators and educational institutions, even if both are guided by the UNCRC.

Recent discussions on research ethics in the human sciences have focused on exploring *lived ethics* (i.e. relational ethics) in encounters (Hilppö et al., 2019). Both chapters resonate well with this notion, arguing for approaches that allow for surprises, *messiness* and the co-construction of knowledge together with children. However, research with children is also heavily impeded by gatekeepers, predefined aims and implications required by ethical boards and research funders. A further consideration is that something of children's embodied, lived and shared experiences needs to be disseminated to wider audiences. Needless to say, pressures on *output* are not unknown in early childhood education and care (ECEC) either. In many countries, ECEC was built on the tradition of adult-led teaching, fostering, educating and socialising children to become skilful, competent members of society. The accountability discourse is still present today—hence, our need for alternative vocabularies to communicate what occurs in ethical, responsive practices.

## Challenging Adult–Child Hierarchies

I have lived a great deal among grown-ups. I have seen them intimately, close at hand. And that hasn't much improved my opinion of them. (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*)

Both chapters contribute powerfully to critical exploration of adult–child hierarchies. It is acknowledged that children's participation is limited by the generational order and structural power (Alanen, 2009; Konstantoni & Emejulu, 2017). Previous work has underlined that children's participation requires conscious efforts from adults not only to recognise children as having a voice but also to understand participation as more than just listening to children (Lundy, 2007). Lundy (2007), building on Shier's (2001) views, emphasises adult's obligations to give children opportunities and help to express their views, listen to their views and, importantly, act appropriately on their views. Cheeseman, Press and Sumsion go further and apply Shier's (2001) principles to infants, considering what infants might say, thereby profoundly challenging the notion that adults should be “in the lead”. Thus, both chapters argue that, to relinquish adult dominance, the adult as organiser, leader, supervisor and controller (i.e. *doing*) should be replaced by the adult as

observer, enhancer and *reader* (i.e. *noticing*) infants' and toddlers' contributions and desires.

Both chapters show how communication is not only a matter of (verbal) language, but, essentially, of attunement to the *other*. Salamon and Palaiologou write about “ethical permeability, tuning in and responding to young children’s reactions to adults’ actions, and relatability—relating to the child’s world rather than trying to understand it from a position of power”. Responsiveness to *otherness* means respecting toddlers’ and infants’ ways of expressing their views and acknowledging their powerful agencies (emotional capital). Similarly, Cheeseman, Press and Sumsion illustrate with narratives such as how “...it is the reading of body movements, gestures and vocalisations that form the basis for *listening*...”. This is challenging, and requires alertness to the danger of making interpretations from the adult (dominant) perspective. In other words, we might continue noticing what is familiar to us and may turn children’s *otherness* into *othering*.

## A Closing Sentiment

And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye. (Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*)

We are grateful to the authors for sharing some of their intellectual journeys and offering alternatives, provocative insights and vocabularies for seeing, noticing and listening to young children. Both chapters underline the importance of ethical commitment in working with infants and toddlers in education and research. We are left to critically reflect on our own conceptions and views, and our understandings of infant communication and contributions. Moreover, we are left with a strong feeling that much remains to be done to re-evaluate how infants and toddlers and related pedagogies are seen in ECEC teacher training programs. We need to reflect on the complexities and tensions involved in pursuing *eupraxia* (good practice) and *democratic moments*. The question also arises: How do we build teacher training that includes space for children to take the lead and takes encounters, invitations and multichannel ways of communicating seriously, not only with children but also with students building their identities as ECEC professionals? We hope the authors will continue their inspiring and important work on these questions.

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