Commentary on Chapters 6 and 7

Supporting communication practices: Beyond the focus on the child

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Chapters 6 and 7 address young children's early language learning from a rights perspective, as articulated through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In Chapter 6, Andrea Tures argues for a cultural-historical approach to enhance young children's individual voices in the learning process. In Chapter 4, Sheila Degotardi and Feifei Han consider how dialogical approaches to language development may actively involve infants and young children in language learning with their educators. The originality of the two chapters stems from their challenge to the dominance of monologist approaches to young children's language learning still prevalent in early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy contexts in many parts of the world. The authors argue that these prevailing approaches militate against young children's rights, as children are active *knowing* agents navigating their everyday lives within the structures and institutions they inhabit. The discussions, arguments and approaches the authors provide could be of interest to the wider global education community.

In Chapter 6, Tures proposes that children's developmental milestones should be detached from the classical language that typically describes them, instead emphasising individual differences between children—an approach that is usually marginalised in policy contexts and research studies on language learning during early childhood. Thus, detaching each child from the *typical* or *atypical* figure, and providing enhanced training to early years educators, ensures that each child's learning needs are met and individualises the context of learning. This approach, consequently, strengthens the uniqueness of every child in educational settings. That said, the simplistic milestones privileged by classical developmental psychologists, and robustly criticised by Tures, and others, may also serve to highlight the differentiated outcomes experienced by children who are disadvantaged by our current education systems. More importantly, perhaps, this chapter highlights the critical need for space and time for children's voice(s) to be heard, and reminds us that young children are curious individuals who are motivated and eager to learn and explore their learning opportunities. This aspect of learning is also often

marginalised in developmental studies as the focus is on studying the accelerated rate of language learning during development, and less on children's curiosity.

Chapter 7 draws on the *agency* concept, which—in line with the UNCRC—supports and aims to change the view of infants and young children as thinkers and knowers, in particular, during social interactions with an educator, while simultaneously acknowledging the dependency on the educator as a facilitator in the linguistic exchange opportunities and space. Thus, agency is discussed from two perspectives: the educator and the educator-infant. As in Chapter 6, the emphasis is also on individual differences and how critical it is to consider the differences among children within the same educational settings. The authors challenge us to consider how children's curiosity and interest in language learning could be made more prominent. The novelty here is the focus on children's right to contribute to their language learning, to enable freedom for the child to develop independently with the support of the educator, while taking into account the costs (time and investment) and challenges that educators face. Here, the educator's role is to initiate or extend the linguistic exchange, reducing the filtering process of messages the child is transmitting.

The two chapters contribute to the emergence of new education methods and challenge the readers' views on language learning from a children's rights perspective. Indeed, the authors of both chapters raise fundamental challenges for the early education field that lay the foundations for further exploration, which Degotardi and Han touch upon at the end of their chapter. The first may be to strengthen the link between language learning and social communication. One of the main channels of human social communication is language, in all its forms, and these multi-modal forms of communication to support social skills and ways of being could be further explored. Relatedly, another challenge is concerning infants' *voices*. How can infants' rights to participate in their/our language learning be promoted in early childhood education settings, and beyond? This challenge dovetails with explorations of other forms of communication that children with special educational needs and disabilities especially, but by no means exclusively, encourage and could be encouraged to learn/teach with their key carers. Although mentioned very briefly at the end of each chapter, we feel it would be interesting in the future to address the topic from the perspective of children with special educational needs and disability (SEND), and children (and early years educators) who may (prefer to) use other ways of communicating than oral language.

Another challenge, implicit within the chapters, that we would like to surface here is the location of language learning primarily in early childhood education settings. We suggest that even if the approaches detailed in these chapters were to be adopted within ECEC policy and practice contexts, some children may still not reach their full potential as there are myriad factors influencing their language learning, not least child poverty. Early childhood education alone can neither address this problem nor its consequences, in spite of narratives in England, at least, about the potential for ECEC to be the engine of young children's social mobility (Social Mobility Commission 2017). Privileging children's language learning as occurring

within ECEC settings or even the home learning environment (which appears to be viewed in policy terms as an extension of ECEC settings) may mask the influences of wider socioeconomic and temporal/spatial circumstances on children's (language) learning. There is robust evidence suggesting that children's educational outcomes and life chances are strongly influenced by their social and material contexts. Children cannot be abstracted from these contexts, nor can the institutions in which they are situated. We would like to suggest that ECEC policy makers, practitioners and researchers take every opportunity to highlight and address this, and avoid the temptation (or injunction) to acquiesce to the responsibilisation of ECEC practitioners (and parents) as being solely accountable for children's (language) learning.

In addition, we would also, by offering a provocation to the authors and readers of this book, apply a similar reasoning to the UNCRC itself. That is to say, that while the UNCRC may serve to usefully raise awareness of children's rights, it does so by individualising children, similarly abstracting them from general human rights agendas. We suggest, among many others (cf. Borda-Carulla 2018; Burman 2008; Lister 2006), that children's rights are interdependent with adults' rights, as Degotardi and Han suggest. Focusing on children's rights does not mean that these rights should be privileged, otherwise unhelpful rights hierarchies may be constructed. In terms of language learning, is it just children who need to learn language? How may we focus on children's communication without looking at the parallel processes and ways in which ECEC researchers and practitioners choose, and are enjoined, to communicate?

We welcome the approaches to early language learning espoused by the authors of both chapters. We support campaigns by the global education community for future strategies to consider how these approaches could be widely implemented, but also, and crucially, that they also highlight wider socioeconomic strategies that would ameliorate the maldistribution of resources directly impacting children's differential abilities and differentiated educational outcomes.

References

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