

Emerald Studies in
Child Centred Practice

Establishing Child Centred Practice in a Changing World



Part A

edited by

Sam Frankel

Establishing Child Centred Practice in a Changing World, Part A

Emerald Studies in Child Centred Practice

Series Editor: Sam Frankel, King's University College, Wester University, Equipping Kids.org, Canada

Emerald Studies in Child Centred Practice: Voice, Collaboration and Change aims to reposition the place of childhood studies by demonstrating the application of core foundational theories to practice. As such, it highlights the place, purpose and power of these theories to inform practice and seek to shape a child-centred approach across the settings within which children live and experience their everyday lives – schools, families, the law, the care system. Uniquely, books in the series will not only draw on academic insight but also include the perspectives of both practitioners and children. The series makes the case for the need for a shared dialogue as a foundation for re-imagining practice.

This new series offers a new and valuable dimension to childhood studies with relevance for how wider society comes to engage with it. Indeed, it offers a chance for childhood studies to increase its presence in society – to demonstrate how an awareness of children's agency and the constructed nature of society can positively influence discourse and debate – with the hope that this can increasingly shape policy and practice and add value to children's everyday experiences. Proposals are welcome for the series that align to this goal and help us to develop and grow childhood studies. The series is particularly keen to explore multi-faceted aspects of children's lives, such as schooling, home lives, children's rights, child protection, activism, and more.

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EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To the inspirational students I have learnt alongside.

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As the dedication suggests, this work is inspired by a recognition of the world and how it is changing. This is constantly brought to my attention through my students, both in terms of current impacts but also their ambitions to see change. This energy and zeal is infectious – and I am very grateful to have been caught up in it.

Thanks to my colleagues for their encouragement, support and commitment to furthering knowledge in this field.

Of course, thanks to those who read this. I hope you will be part of the needed conversations that this book seeks to encourage.

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Chapter 1

Starting a Conversation: An Introduction

Sam Frankel

Our world is in flux (UN, 2019) creating both challenges and opportunities for communities. The purpose of this book, and the series it introduces, is to examine the extent to which we might limit some of those challenges and maximise some of those opportunities by meaningfully involving children. This collection seeks to lay a basis for a conversation, which through a focus on ‘child centred’ practice, allows us to explore

- the value attributed to children’s voices, in light of the assumptions that surround the child in a multiplicity of spaces;
- the willingness for social collaborations as we question traditional adult-child power relations;
- the effectiveness of methods to capture and measure the meaningful impact of children’s participation in navigating social change.

I have been very conscious in recent weeks of articles, both online (BBC Children in Need) and in newspapers (Perry, 2022; Ritschel, 2022), that encourage adults to have ‘conversations’ with children about the war in Ukraine. They have stood out as I don’t remember having seen such invitations before in relation to other major issues – the climate emergency, raising levels of inequality, the impact of AI and other destructive conflicts, but also, despite the anecdotal nature of these discoveries, they raise wider questions about society and its relationship with children and the purpose and place of dialogue.

- (1) Why are adults being encouraged to have conversations with children?
Is the perceived value of these conversations associated with adults managing children’s wellbeing (fulfilling our duty of care for the ‘protected’ child) or are we interested in understanding their viewpoint, validating their feelings as a basis to direct and shape a collective response (enabling the ‘participating’ child)?

- (2) What should adults and children be talking about?
If topics are being prioritised in terms of adult assessments of what is important (or not) – what (within the context of children’s everyday lives) is being missed?
- (3) What help do adults need to be able to converse effectively with children?
Is this a question for the ‘expert’ adult? Or should we be looking to children to get their guidance on managing social disconnection between generations and building bridges that allow for effective dialogue?

The point of this introductory collection, is to build a platform that allows us to examine assumptions that might inform those individual and institutional practices that restrict children’s place in ‘conversations’. 30 years ago a narrative arose that announced both the potential and the possibilities for engaging with children’s everyday experiences (James & Prout, 1990/1997). It centred on two key tenets to help deepen our understanding of social life. First, that children should be seen as active and capable social agents and second, that childhood(s) should be acknowledged as socially constructed. In the vibrant research that has followed the significance given to acknowledging the active role of children in society has grown. The chapters in this book suggest that it is only by finding more effective ways to engage children in conversations about the spaces that we share that we can first, understand social issues fully and second, come together to find relevant responses and successfully navigate the change we all face.

It is, therefore, the intention of this collection and the wider series to establish a space to explore the value of children’s participation through inviting both adults and children to be part of conversations about our changing world (on both a micro (local) and macro (national and international) level). Through revitalising the narrative and broadening our knowledge of children’s everyday lives we (adults) will be better placed to collaborate with children, to form practices that empower the child as a citizen and through this enrich a community as a whole. Establishing effective child centred practice offers a foundation that will allow society to collectively find ways to more effectively navigate the challenges of a changing world and maximise the potential opportunities it offers.

The Chapters

The objectives of this project – ‘establishing child centred practice in a changing world’ – are captured in Chapter 2 written by Grace Spencer and Jill Thompson. It offers a valuable foundation, as they explore terms such as ‘child-centred’ and ‘voice’. In relation to the former they identify the extent to which socially constructed notions of childhood have impacted the way in which children have been positioned in key social settings, with particular reference to power. In order to challenge approaches to practice, defined by constructions of power that assume the authority of the adult, they draw on their research of children’s experiences of COVID-19. Here they highlight that it is through acknowledging children’s ‘voice’ in its fullness (what is said as well as what is not) that we can redress hierarchies by furthering our collective knowledge and understanding of children’s everyday lives. This is extended through a review of health related research that took place in Ghana. Indeed, it is through the *sharing* and *reflecting* (themes

that recur throughout this collection) on this experience that Spencer and Thompson offer some concluding thoughts that draw together these strands around voice, power and what comes to be seen as ‘child centred’ practice. At the centre of this is the notion of *reciprocity*, which they argue should sit at the heart of a desire to see children valued within the research process (and day to day interactions). Child centred practice, therefore, emerges as a dynamic process that is driven by the need to constantly challenge those constructed assumptions held by adults through reflexive strategies that are driven by a search for mutuality and an ambition to enable meaningful agentic opportunities.

The message from this chapter reinforces the need to ‘revitalise our thinking’, presented as the starting point in a series of steps to re-position children within the design of organisational practice (Frankel, 2018). ‘Revitalising our thinking’ presents a challenge to adults to examine the image of the child they hold and how that comes to inform the practices that shape the spaces they share with children. Indeed, it is that sense of revitalising ones thinking that we are invited to consider in Chapter 3. This unique and innovative collaboration between an adult researcher and a child to write an ‘academic’ paper, extends the earlier discussions around power, reciprocity and reflexivity. Although detailing an intimate research relationship, it profiles the ongoing need to be aware of adult assumptions whilst we seek to remove the limitations that we place around the child. This paper offers a clear reminder that it is not that children don’t have a contribution to make, but rather that the barriers we as adults create, make access, at the best partial and at the worst impossible.

In Chapter 3, therefore, we have this account of adult researcher Mackenzie Mountford undertaking a project with child researcher Faye Vento. Faye is Mackenzie’s 12-year-old cousin. There is much that makes this chapter innovative. For example, it has a clear ambition to explore what this notion of reciprocity means in the context of a child centred activity - here writing an ‘academic’ paper. As such, it invites the readers to undertake a journey alongside the researchers, as they set out with the belief that a 12 year old can be an active participant in such an activity. Through remaining reflexive throughout Mackenzie and Faye are able to explore the nature of their relationship, both to each other and to the task, highlighting both the barriers and possibilities that researching together provides. Through detailing this journey the researchers make explicit some key considerations for further research and the potential that children can play if we are able to address some of the practice based limitations that we as adults have imposed. The creativity of this paper, should rock us out of our comfortable understandings of where children should be positioned in relation to research. It asks us to fundamentally re-think both the purpose and the audience for academic research. How could a greater focus on accessibility within research increase the prevalence of children’s input and strengthen the building blocks of knowledge that the academic paper provides?

Chapter 4 continues this trajectory of dismantling adult assumptions that inform practice, as it looks at the barriers facing young people with disabilities and their entry into the work place. It is a paper that highlights themes around accessibility and the extent to which existing practices, with a little co-participation, can be

changed. It offers valuable thoughts on a co-productive process, as it integrates the views of the research team, including young people and practitioners. This partnership approach clearly adds to the themes addressed in earlier chapters, as here, a range of perspectives are balanced within a 'reciprocal' research culture. Indeed, it is through embracing that notion of collaboration that the team are able to offer a creative response to the challenges young people with disabilities face when entering the work place. This, notably, is done through exploring the place of comedy and humour as a tool to tackle some of those established assumptions. A research project in progress, but as highlighted, one that reflects the potential for practice that intentionally considers the meaning of partnership and as a result the possibilities it provides for addressing themes such as power and inequality and encouraging change in creative and relevant ways.

It is a similar desire to be creative, enabled by the right kind of partnership, that frames the thinking in Chapter 5, where Louca-Mai Brady and team explore health care provision and the way in which children's voice is or, perhaps more noticeably, is not included. This paper highlights the value of positioning children more directly in conversations about their health in a UK context, as they reflect on the scope to which policy allows for effective youth engagement. In another successful collaboration between young people, practitioners and academics this team are able to reflect on different models for participation. Notably, they highlight that fundamentally participation has to begin with finding ways to 'start the conversation'. With reference to lessons learnt during the pandemic they encourage a more imaginative approach to be taken by embracing methods for communication and engagement that we are increasingly familiar with. Through an increased focus on child centred principles, the team present a vision in which there are multiple opportunities for children to be heard in meaningful ways, ultimately amplifying children's voices and consequently shaping practices within the system.

From the input of young people in the UK we move to young people in Canada and two chapters that look at the way in which children are positioned in relation to the legal process and to wider government agencies set up to enable children's voice. The first of these chapters, Chapter 6, reflects on the process of engaging justice involved young people. It is written by Rachel Birnbaum whose work has been influential in encouraging a growing recognition of children's voice in the Canadian legal system, particularly in relation to separation and divorce. This paper reflects on the inclusion of children's opinions in the process of legislative change and how including these views has relevance, not only in relation to wider obligations (such as responsibilities to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC) but also in creating more effective policy and practice. In another very practical reflection on a research process, Birnbaum is able to highlight the ways in which it is possible to weave in reflections on the UNCRC to explore domestic policy change, and how this forms a basis for exploring the views and perspectives of young people themselves. The approach taken here offers a framework for engaging children's voices and encouraging child centred practices in future research in this area.

A notable reflection on Chapter 6 is the extent to which it is not necessarily a lack of resources but sometimes a lack of relevant opportunities that can limit

children's engagement. This is a theme in Chapter 7 as Daniella Bendo, Christine Goodwin-De Faria, and Sefania Maggi, add to this discussion through exploring the value of practices that enable children's engagement in systems that are actually set up to support their participation. As such, this chapter combines a focus on the offices of the Child and Youth Advocates, instituted as a response to Canada's commitments under the UNCRC, alongside a consideration of the way the system facilitates children's voices in the Aboriginal Youth Courts. Through looking at these different child serving institutions the researchers are able to offer some valuable lessons in relation to – the role that children are invited to play in shaping practices, the need for more creative and collaborative efforts in framing understandings of participation and the importance of directly address issues around power relations. The re-iteration of themes from earlier chapters here, adds growing weight to the necessity of re-vitalising how we see the role of children in these important settings, recognising the messaging this has for children's place in society more widely.

Chapter 7 revolves around the need to consider what participation actually means and how it comes to be actioned and as we traverse back across the Atlantic, Chapter 8 offers an insight into a project where the same questions are being asked. In Chapter 8, this UK-based research team shows yet again the importance of partnership and the opportunities it provides for collectively addressing challenges around children and young people's participation in youth justice. As such the team seek to situate their own research in a growing recognition of the value of children and young people's voices in shaping effective practice. A product of this is their own transformative framework, namely Participatory Youth Practice. As they explore the application of this framework they show that in terms of implementation barriers remain. They highlight, as others have, some of the difficulties organisations must overcome around understandings of participation and children and childhood more broadly. This chapter again highlights the value of collaboration and the extent to which partnerships can create opportunities through the pooling of ideas, which in turn lead to practical steps for change, balancing the differing perspectives of the key stakeholders.

Reflecting on global change, through the lens of the climate emergency, Chapter 9 highlights the extent to which children are looking to the law to enforce their rights and amplify their voice. What Laurene Graziani, encourages us to consider, is the extent to which access to law not only extends the voice of the child, but also the part they can take in leading a direction for change. COP26 showed children's ambitions to be involved in conversations on global issues, as well as raising questions about the role that we as communities and countries want children to have. The law, through opening points of access, is presented as a strategy to challenge existing barriers, as well as offering a means for redress. The chapter throughout presents the need for governments to more closely consider their relationship with the UNCRC, bearing in mind changes that will allow claimants (children) to bring a case to the Committee of the CRC where it rules that national courts have not responded appropriately. A model in its infancy, but one that clearly provides a platform that could be used to amplify

children's voices, as long as children are enabled (bearing in mind how many countries have struggled to simply let children know they have rights in the first place).

Chapter 10 sees us transitioning away from the legal system as Katarzyna Ornaka highlights the extent to which assumptions of the child, as seen in the preceding chapters, act as a backdrop to children's experiences of institutional foster care in Poland. Indeed, what stands out in this chapter is the extent to which images of the child, framed by adult assumptions, continue to influence and define practices that inform children's experiences. Through looking at children's engagement with the care system this chapter invites a closer consideration of the journey children are on to form an identity, and how the practices created limit and restrict this search. As such, it highlights the need for practice to reflect the value of investing in relationships, as children and adults find ways to establish effective partnerships to navigate this institutional experience. There is much more still to be done for such thinking to become common place, however the chapter encourages a recognition of the value of re-positioning institutional lenses so that those in organisations see the need to establish an environment where practice is defined through dialogue built on an investment in relationships.

This final chapter in the first volume, offers a sense of the possibilities that re-framing our attitudes towards child centred practice might offer. This collaborative paper from the team at IN2FROCC not only highlights new spaces where children's participation may be welcomed but also reinforces further those themes that have recurred throughout this collection. In Chapter 11, we are introduced to the world of fashion and the place children's voices might play in changing engagement in this pervasive area of our everyday lives. The paper reflects on a number of collaborative projects in Europe that highlight the different ways in which children can be included in conversations that have the potential to not only educate but also change practice in the industry. It is a paper that combines the wider global ambition, set out in the opening section, alongside some practical research initiatives that open a relevant dialogue. In many ways this paper highlights the need for us all to recognise those spaces where children's voices may have been ignored, or indeed those areas where children's perspectives may never have been sought. In offering a sense of what the possibilities might be, these case studies provide examples for developing practices through which adults and children may connect in shaping discussions, using a language associated with rights, to direct more meaningful conversations on issues that matter to all of us (adults and children) in a changing world.

Final Thought

In short, the aim of this collection is to show how those fundamental principles around children as social agents and the constructed nature of childhoods, continue to have resonance and offer a foundation for an important and needed dialogue in relation to defining and understanding child centred practice. It is the hope that this text and the series it forms part of can contribute to strategies for engagement which are welcomed by adult decisions-makers and practitioners, as

they see the need, relevance and importance of including children's voices in shaping practice. Such a realisation, as we 'revitalise' our thinking, has huge potential for the way in which the spaces that we share with children form, as opportunities for co-constructing practice are increasingly accepted. At a time when we are facing heightened social challenges, it seems relevant and necessary that we are invested in equipping children to be part of conversations that will not only further our ability to understand the issues but also create opportunities to collaborate, as we search for positive responses. A focus on both voice and collaboration needs to be underpinned by a willingness to improve our ability to capture and evaluate impact and measure the contribution children play in supporting communities to effectively navigate change (recognising the variety of ways in which children's participation might be enacted).

Throughout the chapters that follow, readers will be encouraged to reflect on what might be learnt and applied to a collective journey to 'establish child centred practice in a changing world'.

As part of this it may be of value to keep asking

- (1) Why are adults being encouraged to have conversations with children?
- (2) What should adults and children be talking about?
- (3) What help do adults need to be able to converse effectively with children?

As well as the following chapters offering answers, they will also raise additional questions, highlighting just how important it is that we work on building conversations that further our understandings about the issues we face within communities. Such conversations can help us reflect on assumptions around power that have limited children's access and engagement for too long. An informed dialogue can further our capacity to know what 'doing' partnership well can look like, as well as offering a greater sense of how best we can capture and demonstrate the impact that children's meaningful participation offers to our ability to navigate a changing world.

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