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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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THEMATIC SECTION

Children’s rights at 21: policy, theory, practice
Children’s rights at 21: policy, theory, practice
Introductory remarks

Solveig Hägglund & Nina Thelander*

When the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in November 1989, this was the final step in a long process which started around the first world war. Three Declarations on rights for children, dated 1924, 1948 and 1959 were forerunners. The early one was adopted by the League of Nations, the other two by the United Nations. The main concern in these early documents was an emphasis on protection and on children’s rights to social welfare, i.e., the child’s needs dominated the image (Thelander, 2009). The appearance of these documents at the international stage was linked with humanistic rhetoric and charity movements, particularly visible and outspoken in Europe. They directed attention towards children’s vulnerable position in war times and towards the bad provision of health and social service for children in general. Individual contributors referred to as particularly significant for this “children’s movement” history, are Ellen Key, Eglantyne Jebb and Janusz Korczak, all active in the first half of the 20th century (ibid.). Even though the Convention on the Rights of the Children only recently passed its 21st birthday, the story of children’s rights thus has been around for almost a century, a period of time during which major shifts in the ways children and childhoods are viewed took place.

Although the CRC did challenge traditional ideas of the child as a part or property of the family, and also the view of the child as the state’s investment for a future, and better, society, it also holds the image of a child in need of protection and close relationships with caring adults. A common way to describe the CRC child is to underline the fact that s/he is both dependent and independent. Sometimes this has been discussed as contradictory and questionable, as something that causes problems and dilemmas in the perspective of the child as a right-holder (cf., for example, James & James, 2004, for an overview). However, it has also been argued that children, like any human being need other people and that there is no contradiction between being competent in using one’s agency and being cared for by others (Lee, 2005).

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©Author. ISSN 2000-4508, pp.365–371
The ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights on the Child (CRC) by most nations around the world, was a symbolic and moral acknowledgement of the child as a full worthy human being. The text meets the requirements of international law and the countries that have ratified it are expected to actively ensure that children’s rights, as articulated in this document, are fulfilled. The ratification means that governments, in the Convention referred to as “State Parties”, have agreed upon that they:

...shall undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the present Convention. With regard to economic, social and cultural rights, State Parties shall undertake such measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international co-operation. (CRC, article 4)

For obvious reasons, the implementation of the Convention has taken diverse routes depending on “available resources” and other contextual reasons at the national level. Interpretations of what meaning and priority should be given to the more than fifty articles in the Convention are embedded in cultural, economic and social conditions and discourses, with dissimilar but significant relevance for implementation and monitoring of the Convention. The fact that the Convention has been received differently in different countries is evident, for example, when reading the comments made by the CRC-Committee on the national reports handed in regularly by the countries that have ratified the Convention. These reports, although based on the same agenda for implementation of children’s rights, seem to consider each nation’s specific challenges when commenting and criticizing their work (see, for example, the contribution of Ann Quennerstedt in this issue).

The adoption of the Convention was not only the end of a process, it also initiated new ones. For those nations who successively ratified the Convention, political strategies for its implementation had to be developed, new organizations needed to be settled, and information and education about the Convention had to be organized. In the implementation work, pre-schools and schools have been particularly in focus, the most immediate reason being that the right to education is explicitly formulated in article 28. But also, because educational settings are key spaces for children to learn and practice participatory action (article 12), to experience and understand democratic and human values (article 29), be met by respect and tolerance (article 2), and be given possibilities to develop (article 6). The importance of educational arenas in work with human rights for children also concerns its professionals. Courses within teacher training programmes and in-service training have been asked for and to some extent also been developed (Hägglund & Thelander, 2008).

**Research on children’s rights**

The brief description above on the origin of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the commitments made by the states that ratified it, serves as an intro-
duction to the focus for this special issue of *Education Inquiry*. The contributions represent a selection of papers originally presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER), within the network *Research on children’s rights in education*. This network was inaugurated in 2003 with the explicit purpose to “…explore the ethical, methodological, legal and pedagogical issues that emerge at the intersection of children’s rights and educational contexts. A particular focus is the ways in which children’s rights provide a provocation to think and practice differently” (ECER Network 25 Descriptor, 2011). Over the years that have passed, research on children’s rights in education has become a field of research with an increasing body of publications in which questions, challenges and conceptualizations in relation to a wide range of aspects related to the main theme are elaborated. If one were to mention themes that have been brought up comparatively often in the network sessions, research on children’s participation (as classroom practices and as citizenship), children’s rights vs. human rights, and educational policy, would be placed among the top issues and are represented also in this special issue. However, before introducing these papers, some recent references with relevance for research on children’s rights in a wider perspective will be made.

When considering the agenda for research on children’s rights in general it is worth noting that around the years when the UNCRC was adopted, a new paradigm in social studies of children and childhood was introduced in sociological literature (Qvortrup, et. al, 1994, Jenks, 1982, James & Prout, 1990). The introduction of this approach to research on children and childhood was based on a call for studies focusing on children’s experience of life and to their positions as active subjects. Also, the concept of childhood was introduced as a social category, that is possible to identify and describe in terms of social, economic and structural terms. When commenting upon the fact that one of the key themes for this new tradition has been to explore children’s agency and voice, Qvortrup et al. (2009:5) mention the parallel events:

...it is interesting that the UNCRC was formulated during the same period as the breakthrough in child studies, because this momentous document also granted children’s participatory potential and endowed them with participatory rights, even though they were restricted compared to those held by the adults.

Without doubt, research conducted in the field of childhood studies has had an impact on the development of concepts and knowledge, not only in child studies in general but also in the field of children’s rights research, for example, in the area of citizenship and participation (Alderson, 2008, Hägglund, 2009, Kjörholt, et al, 2004).

The connection in time between childhood studies and the appearance of CRC some decades ago may be looked upon as mediated by discourses at hand, emphasizing rights and democracy (Qvortrup et al, 2009). Today, the emphasis on globalization
and individualization, not least in education, tend to place issues of rights in other, more complex perspectives. In a recent review on research on children’s rights, Reynart et al (2009) conclude with some critical and important comments. Based on an analysis of published international studies on children’s rights since the adoption of the CRC in 1989, the authors conclude that the field mainly has been focusing on “...standard setting, implementation and monitoring..” (page 526). According to them, this emphasis on the normative aspects of children’s rights is in accordance with the agenda of research on human rights in general and is linked with what has been referred to as “the global human rights industry” (ibid., page 526). In like vein, calls for technologies for measuring and assessing rights are evident, implying a tendency to strive for consensus as for what standards should be agreed upon in programs for implementation and evaluation. Referring to other authors, Reynart et al argues that this may lead to a “…technocratic discourse’ (Fernando, 2001:12) that no longer addresses the meaning of children’s rights” (page 528). In their further argumentation for a more critical approach to studies of children’s rights and its meaning, the authors point at the lack of contextualization of rights as another consequence of a technical approach to rights.

The critical comments on children’s rights research as being made by these and other authors (Burman,1996, Lee,2005, Qvortrup,2008), opens up a research agenda that stretches beyond an understanding of the Convention as a document where “curriculum-like” norms for what constitutes children’s rights are formulated. The main point made by these critical voices is that ideas of children’s rights be linked with constructions of children and childhood, embedded in time-and-place-bound discourses, rather than based on a once-and-for-all essential view on rights. Such an approach to studies on children’s rights opens up for question knowledge about presumptions, complexities, discourses and logics within which meanings of rights, in practice as well as theory, are constructed.

The references being made above are relevant for the wider landscape of research in children’s rights that also have a bearing on research within the field of education. Although earlier established fields of educational research such as international education, peace education, democracy education and values education are linked to issues of children´s rights, research that specifically directs questions towards the Convention and children´s rights is sparsely reported (Thelander, 2009). Considering the fact that, in those countries where compulsory education for all is provided, children spend most of their daily lives in school, thereby forming a context for rights to be practiced, this is worth noting. Even though the primary right in relation to education is to provide it at all, once inside the school, it is difficult not to note the frequent occurrence of potential right-relevant situations.

When Thelander (2009) summarizes a review on research on children’s rights being conducted within education, she concludes that several studies state inappropriateness and inequalities in the provision of education. But she also refers to
studies on how schooling has been a tool for change and for supporting a better life for children. Apart from this kind of macro-oriented studies, the overview includes research conducted in children’s micro settings, i.e. school and pre-schools. Here, participation and children’s voices dominate the field. From these studies, Thelander emphasises the need for contextualization. Questions, such as, who speaks and who is listening, in what situations and in what matters children’s views are being asked for, and to what degree children’s insights and experiences actually make a change, are put forward. Thelander concludes her review by formulating some statements that she finds informative for the state of the arts in our knowledge about children and rights: children are active and competent actors in their own life; they are parts of their time and space contexts; they are always subordinated adults; they suffer from the same structural injustices as adults do. These statements may seem obvious, but when using them as a guide for formulating complex research questions directed to specific settings, groups or institutions, they can support a systematic search for more detailed knowledge about conditions and practice within the field of children’s rights in education.

### Six contributions from research on children’s rights in education

The contributions included in this special issue represent some of the areas that have been in focus for recent research on children’s rights in education. Although the network is hosted by a European research association, our sessions have attracted researchers also from other parts of the world, something that we have encouraged. Taken together, the texts illustrate approaches that search for describing complexities, identifying intersections and formulating necessary conceptual tools. These are all important things in an area of research that, at the age of 21, has passed some distance on the way to becoming established, but which still looks forward to encountering new challenges.

In the first contribution, *The challenges of conducting ethical research with children*, Deborah Harcourt and Jonathon Sargeant put forward and discuss ethical issues in child research. Referring to international literature and to own experiences they present a number of aspects along the research process when ethical dilemmas arise and need to be considered. According to the authors, if one as a researcher takes a stand where the child is regarded as a participant subject, co-researcher and co-reporter, this calls for a considerable awareness of the subtle pitfalls and risks at hand. They also draw attention to, and discuss some of the challenges associated with the increasing demands made by research ethics committees in seeking permission to carry out such research.

In the second contribution, *The political construction of children’s rights in education. A comparative analysis of Sweden and New Zealand*, Ann Quennerstedt presents an analysis of how children’s rights as a universal imperative articulated in
the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, is interpreted in the context of national educational policy in the two countries. Drawing on text analysis of national political documents she reports commonalities and differences. The findings, discussed in relation to the countries’ cultural and historical contexts open interesting insights into some unexpected differences in the way children’s rights are given space and are being interpreted in educational policy.

Another approach to policy issues is presented in the third contribution, Social representations theory in the analyses of children’s rights to equitable education in Sweden, by Guadalupe Francia. Through analyses of documents on school policy, produced by Swedish political parties, she shows that social representations of students and student achievements can hold views that are contradictory. Although a neoliberal agenda underlines equality, it demands equal rights to make choices. In discussing the findings, the author argues that when ignoring structural inequalities or when, as in the case of the extreme right wing party, stressing homogeneity means that diversity is not recognized and valued, children’s rights in education need to be questioned.

Policy issues are also at hand in Vicky Coppock’s contribution Liberating the mind or governing the soul? Psychotherapeutic education, children’s rights and the disciplinary state. She offers a critical examination of psychotherapeutic education programmes, recently being offered in the UK as a response to British children’s low ranking in international assessments of children’s well-being. Using concepts anchored in Foucault’s and Rose’s texts on governmentality and discipline, the author concludes that the programme, rather than supporting children’s well-being, can be seen as a tool for control that undermines their agency. From a children’s rights perspective, therefore, state health policy can be regarded as a power technology to prevent the youngest citizens from attaining liberation.

The contribution of John I’Anson, Childhood, complexity orientation and children’s rights: enlarging the space of the possible? concerns some of the performative dilemmas involved in enacting children’s rights by adults. Drawing on recent research the author gives empirical illustrations of how what is referred to as ‘complexity reduction’ is at work in situations where children’s rights are to be materialized. By giving examples as to how adults’ views on children influence interactions, restricting vs. enlarging spaces for children’s rights to be materialized are shown. An ‘ecology of rights’ approach to the study of children’s rights, where concepts and models for analysis allow, rather than reduce complexity, is called for.

In the final contribution, Children’s rights in student voice projects: where does the power lie?, Carol Robinson reports from student voice projects. By supporting groups of student researchers in two schools, the purpose was to explore whether and how this could serve as a model for organizing children’s possibilities to participate and have a voice in daily school practice, according to article 12 in the CRC. The findings indicate that the relationship between teacher and students is a key factor, for
facilitating as well as for inhibiting student voices. Power imbalance between child and adult is identified as a challenge. Some important and subtle ethical dilemmas encountered by the researchers are being commented upon.

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