Editorial

The Field of Children's Rights: Taking Stock, Travelling Forward

The 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was a time for many in the field to take stock. Most of that focus was on the achievements or otherwise of the Convention itself. We chose to do something different. We chose to take stock of the field of research itself, drawing on some core themes as examples, and to interrogate what has been referred to as the ‘tendency towards consensus-thinking surrounding the UNCRC’ (Quennerstedt, Robinson and l’Anson, 2018: 38). The papers featured in this special issue were initially presented at a conference in London in June 2019, sponsored by the Journal and the University of Liverpool. Each paper was prepared by established scholars in the field working in partnership with early career scholars. They were asked to reflect on key themes, methodological and theoretical innovations and, indeed, gaps in different areas of children’s rights, including youth justice, migration, poverty and education. Contributors also reflected on advancements in empirical and conceptual research relating to child participation, on theories of children’s rights and on mechanisms for incorporation of the UNCRC into national law. In doing so, our aim was to stimulate critical reflection on the extent to which the UNCRC has impacted on research, and to identify priorities for future research.

We recognise that the suggestions raised in this collection of papers may not be the only important issues going forward, but collectively they provide crosscutting insights into the state of research in our field. For example, one pressing issue that arose during the conference delegates’ discussion of the papers is the extent to which our efforts to take stock sufficiently represent and, indeed, support global research themes and practices. It has not escaped our attention that all but two of the contributors to our international conference in June and to this special issue are from Western Europe. This prompts some
reflection on the international reach of our established research networks, and on our efforts to proactively engage with and learn from our children's rights colleagues from the Global South. It certainly brings to the fore some unsettling questions about whether the emerging commitment to decolonising the curriculum more generally (Freire, 2010; Breidlid, 2009) and to decolonising children's rights in particular (Grahn-Farley, 2008; Okyere, 2017) has permeated our research practices, collaborations and responsibilities. We may be deeply aware of and critical of the legacies of colonialism in political, social and cultural terms, but are we sufficiently acknowledging and responding to issues of empire, exploitation, racial and cultural inequalities when framing our research questions and determining our methodological and theoretical approaches?

Elizabeth Faulkner and Conrad Nyamutata reflect on such issues in their contribution to this collection. In particular, they point to the potential for the UN CRC to perpetuate colonial tendencies if accepted uncritically as a global and definitive blueprint for children's rights. A similar risk accompanies other normative frameworks informing children's rights scholarship, particularly from a legal perspective. What of the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Labour Organisation, the European Union, the Sustainable Development Goals and other UN instruments? To what extent do we interrogate whether imperialistic and Eurocentric approaches have distorted legal, policy and jurisprudential interpretations of children's rights at such levels?

Similar issues around the extent and embeddedness of "colonial creep" arise in relation to theory. Noam Peleg and Karl Hanson's review highlights how theoretical constructions of children's rights continue to be dominated by white predominantly male, Western scholars. This, in turn, risks overlooking a broader, global perspective of children's lives, experiences and interests. Their invitation to explore more deeply how such theories might be brought to bear on intersectional discrimination and globalisation processes should be taken seriously, bearing in mind the distinct contexts within which children are located. In doing so, we are reminded of the challenges of exposing and reflecting the heterogeneity of children's experiences through our research, whilst also revealing commonalities (of interests, needs and effects) within a universal rights framework.

Decolonising Research: What Does this Mean for the Global Children's Rights Research Community?

Keikelame and Swartz (2019) identify a number of issues that should be borne in mind when seeking to decolonise research methodologies that can be
usefully applied to research relating to children's rights. First, they point to the issue of power. Colonialism is characterised by domination – the control of individuals or groups over the territory and behaviour of other individuals or groups (Horvath, 1972: 46). One important way of mitigating white, western domination in children's rights research is to put in place measures to achieve more equal power sharing between (as opposed to power over) research collaborators and participants. Such an approach recognises that the researcher is not the sole producer of knowledge, but rather that both the researcher and the researched make equitable and valuable contributions to the research process (Darroch, 2014). Individually this requires that academics in spaces of privilege reflect on how others perceive and how we use our own positions of authority – as researcher, lead investigator, supervisor – to achieve equitable and respectful interactions from the outset. For collaborative work, it requires those researchers to interrogate whether they are perpetuating power-driven hierarchies and inequalities in how research partnerships are organised and conducted. This includes questioning more readily whether external funding and consultancy opportunities in which we are involved are routinely led by white, Western scholars; whether collaborators from developing regions are routinely allocated subordinate roles in research teams; and whether research contracts connected with international projects are sufficiently stable, fair, safe and appropriately remunerated. Zavala (2013) notes that embedding participation as a modus operandi rather than simply a methodological approach to empirical work is key for dismantling entrenched and unhealthy colonialist power dynamics in research.

... the transformation of research can happen when the researched and the researchers are involved from the initial development of the identification of the research problem, development of the research proposal, design and methodology and implementation in all phases of the project. In addition, active participation of the researched can enable collective ownership, collective data analysis, collective presentation and communication of findings.

A second, related consideration is that of trust. Colonialism is characterised by a complete abuse and erosion of trust resulting from systemic exploitation of individuals, communities and countries. Exploitative research practices – conscious or otherwise – significantly undermine trust. The potential to reduce children to research objects in the pursuit of empirical data, for example, is a form of exploitation, particularly in contexts and cultures where children's position and rights are less advanced or ill-implemented and where systems of ethical surveillance less developed. This reinforces the importance
of developing sensitive, robust cross-national ethical protocols to safeguard researchers, the researched and the communities in which they live – including migrant and minority ethnic communities in the global north (Liamputtong, 2010; UKCDR). Equally, our collaborative arrangements with research partners from such communities should be characterised by a clear commitment to reciprocity, inclusion and attribution when it comes to decision-making about research priorities, methods, publication and dissemination.

Linked to this point, Keikelame and Swartz identify culture and cultural competence as important features of a decolonial approach to research. All too often, ethical tools and research methods mirror largely Westernised models that are ill-adapted to the contextual nuances of child-related research in non-western regions or communities. An anti-colonialist approach requires us to interrogate what efforts we invest in understanding and appreciating the language, culture and traditions of the children who are subjects of our research. In the context of cross-linguistic research, we might need to reflect on the potential for children’s voices to be diluted or distorted through translation, analysis and our own culturally biased interpretation of empirical data. Equally, researchers should be questioning the reach and scope of their literature reviews and their openness to considering published work from across the globe. Language barriers, limited access to data and less developed research resources and infrastructures (library resources and research governance frameworks, for instance) all inhibit the development, publication and dissemination of valuable work. But we could be doing more to overcome such challenges; researchers could be thinking more creatively about how to share resources (as peer reviewers, collaborators and supervisors) in ways that build and value local capacities in the contexts in which they are most needed.

Ruth Brittle and Ellen Desmet’s review of children’s rights research in the context of migration, for example, points to a dearth in published research from Africa, Asia and Latin America in spite of the extensive internal and cross-national migration taking place in such regions. Moreover, their review reveals how the global refugee crisis has acted as a honey pot for Western researchers, leading to a proliferation of work on unaccompanied children in particular. While such work may shine a spotlight on States’ failure to comply with their humanitarian obligations, much of this work signals an uncomfortable reversion to colonialist narratives, including the civilizing function of Western (notably European) legal, policy and humanitarian intervention and the intractable vulnerability and helplessness of child refugees.

This links in with a final point of reflection raised by Keikelame and Swartz when seeking to decolonise our research. This relates to the recognition of individual and community assets. It demands a shift away from a deficit-oriented tendency to problematise children’s situations, particularly in a developing
context, and from a concomitant presumption that Western-led research will offer much-needed intellectual and empirical insights. Instead, there is a case for focusing more on the strengths, capacities and resilience of children, their families and their communities, and on questions of agency, resistance and identity in young people’s efforts to confront what may be exceedingly challenging economic, social and political circumstances (ní Laoire, cited in Alanen, 2018: 130). This requires sensitive planning in the way that research questions are framed and in the way that findings are reported and implemented; it demands some consideration of how such work can reflect and harness the capacities of local actors to identify and respond to their own needs and to the needs of their community in a sustained and self-sufficient way; and it requires some consideration of how comparable situations or problems in the West might learn from such approaches.

The task of identifying and rooting out traces of colonialism in research is neither easy nor is it cost neutral. Convincing researchers that such tendencies exist in the first place is a mission in itself. But at least routinely asking ourselves these questions should encourage a deeper, critical consciousness of how and why we approach our research in the way that we do and of how we might avoid reinforcing historical power imbalances in future individual and collaborative projects, not just with those in the global south, but in the global north too where colonialist legacies and attitudes prevail. Importantly, the above examples illustrate how adopting an anti-colonialist approach speaks to the values and methods associated with research integrity and ethical practice more generally.

### 2 Children’s Rights Research and Interdisciplinarity

A second cross-cutting theme emerging from our reflections on the 30th anniversary of the UN CRC is that of interdisciplinary. The extensive research review provided by the contributors to this special issue serves to remind us that children’s rights is, indeed, an inherently multidisciplinary endeavour. Their reflections feature scholarship from a range of perspectives including psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, social policy, history, geography, philosophy, neuroscience, medical ethics, economics, law, the arts and politics. But questions remain as to whether the multiple disciplines that continue to inform children’s rights research represent the interdisciplinarity that commentators have long been calling for (Prout, 2005; Strober, 2010; Reynaert, Desmet, Lembrechts and Vandenhole, 2015).

Academics have, for some years, pointed to the value of interdisciplinarity which is understood to involve investigating and understanding problems
through the integration of epistemologies, concepts and methods from different disciplines.

As Baraldi notes (2018: 131), the combination of different approaches has deepened our insights and enhanced innovation in several areas, such as political and social participation, citizenship and rights, forms of social order and power relations. The contribution by Nessa Lynch and Ton Liefaard, for instance, highlights the growing importance of research insights from neuroscience and developmental psychology in advancing our understanding of children's capacities and responsibility in the context of criminal justice. They note the growing, positive impact of such perspectives on strategic litigation and advocacy efforts, particularly in the US which, alongside human rights arguments, strengthen children's protection against disproportionately punitive responses to offending.

Forging stronger interdisciplinary connections and capacities should be a particularly important priority for contributors to *The International Journal of Children's Rights* if we remind of ourselves of one of its founding aims: to contribute to the implementation of children's rights and to have an impact on children's role in society (Longford and Veerman, Editorial, 1993). With that in mind, advocates of interdisciplinarity recognise that the problems facing children today are highly complex and multifaceted, and cannot be satisfactorily investigated, let alone solved, in disciplinary silos (Strober, 2010). For instance, two of the biggest challenges for children's rights (not featured in this collection) are climate change and the digital environment. Such issues call for new cross-disciplinary alliances between technology, science, geography and human rights to enable us to tap into a fuller range of methodological and conceptual resources.

But despite the 'apparently consensual discourse on the necessity of interdisciplinary work' (Moody and Darbellay, 2019: 9) it is clear that there is still much work to be done to address our attachments to certain research traditions (Baraldi, 132; Tisdall, cited in Alanen et al., 2018) and to achieve fruitful interdisciplinary fusion. A good example of the need for more creative interdisciplinary working is in relation to child poverty. Aoife Nolan and Kirrily Pells' contribution to this collection, for instance, highlights the 'historic dominance of law' in the study of economic and social rights. This has proven simply too limited to address the acute poverty problems confronting children today which stem from a complex mix of individual, familial, societal and macroeconomic issues. They point to the value of other disciplines such as economics, development studies and social policy in providing a fuller picture of the causes, effects and potential responses to poverty, but such work is not yet sufficiently forthcoming. Other work has suggested how methodologies...
grounded in economics, including health economics, could be creatively adapted and combined with human rights-based approaches to demonstrate how investment in children's rights is not just legally and morally sound, but financially prudent too (Stalford, 2019).

In the same vein, Ruth Brittle and Ellen Desmet's review of the children's rights and migration research suggests the dominance of legal studies, with interdisciplinary interaction largely limited to social sciences and humanities. This, in turn, has stifled methodological innovation in an area that could gain considerably richer insights from science (in the context of age assessments, for instance), psychology and the like. This is also true in relation to work on incorporation of the Convention in law. Simon Hoffman and Rebecca Stern's contribution demonstrates that this is an area dominated by legal, doctrinal analysis but one that is also crying out for robust empirical contributions exploring the economic, societal and individual impact of incorporation and implementation of the Convention.

But “going interdisciplinary” presents its own challenges too; there is an inherent suspicion that bringing new disciplinary methods and perspectives to bear necessarily invokes a more superficial light-touch approach, whereby we ‘pick and choose ... without having an in-depth knowledge of particular of particular theories and concepts’ (Tisdall, cited in Alanen, 2018: 129). In many cases, nurturing the skills and insights needed to engage in a particular study of a particular phenomenon in a particular way takes years of specialist training and formation. Simply tipping our toe into these unfamiliar areas may not pass muster when viewed by experts in the respective disciplinary spheres. Moreover, it is apparent from Tisdall and McMellon's contribution that the groundbreaking work on child participation has transformed approaches methodologically but that the implications of this research for children and their rights are not yet fully understood. Methods of researching that need to evolve.

That said, there is no doubt that interdisciplinarity broadens our horizons and, consequently, our audience. It enables us to couch a particular problem in a new disciplinary frame, introducing children's rights into otherwise foreign, perhaps even skeptical, or even hostile, arenas. Cross-fertilising children's rights with other, traditionally adult-centric disciplines, for instance, can have a positive, ‘disruptive impact’ creating opportunities to investigate issues from children's perspective (ní Laoire, cited in Alanen, 2018: 133; Brems, Vandenhole and Desmet, 2017). This disruption is essential if we are to break new ground in law, policy and practice; it can package messages and evidence to policy makers and politicians who may be ambivalent to pure rights-based arguments. Similarly, experience indicates that interdisciplinarity can cultivate radical
new thinking and approaches by practitioners. Health practitioners working with children, for instance, can learn much from children's rights scholarship when it comes to determining best interests or assessing capacity to consent when making life-changing (or even life-ending) decisions (Cave, 2014; Cave and Nottingham, 2018).

Lest we feel overwhelmed by the requirements of interdisciplinarity – epistemologically, technically or methodologically – it is perhaps useful to see it as creating opportunities for new, creative collaborations and conversations. Much like notions of childhood, theoretical, methodological and conceptual frameworks are constructed, as are academic disciplines. With that in mind, they should be allowed to evolve in response to contemporary questions and problems confronting children rather than remaining static. And, of course, we still need good, thorough, single discipline-focused work on children's rights. Quennerstedt and Moody's contribution to this issue on “education”, for instance, not only raises issues that echo throughout our field (colonialism, lack of theory, methodological challenges) but also identifies a lack of research on children's education rights from a purely pedagogical perspective.

3 Going Forward: A Charter for Children's Rights Research

Notwithstanding the need for greater interdisciplinarity, children's rights research should be recognised and understood for what it is. It is located at an interesting intersection between human rights and childhood studies but it is not just a small, cross-cutting element of both; it is a discipline in itself, which has, as we will see across the papers in this special edition, generated distinctive and original theories, methods and foci that harness the strengths of both to create a field of research that is truly international, interdisciplinary and impactful. That said, the field of study undoubtedly suffers within each of the two “parent” disciplines, with many researchers reporting a strong sense that their work is not given the same respect as that of other human rights academics or sociologists, for example. The reasons why this perception continues are not clear. However, as discussed in the journal's last editorial, it is likely to be connected in part to a more general unease about accepting that children do, can or should have rights.

The challenges going forward are apparent. Children are a third of the world's population but disproportionately ignored, marginalised and discounted. So too in research. For most of this century, it was considered acceptable to research them within their family unit, gathering data about them through proxies (their parents, teachers, social workers) rather than as independent
subjects capable of speaking to their own lives and experiences. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been a crucial catalyst in overturning that attitude and approach across disciplines. Yet still the work that we do can be dismissed and disregarded. A scan through the reference list of the papers in this special issue demonstrates how few articles on children's rights appear in established human rights, sociological or leading journals in core disciplines such as psychology, social work, health or education. Moreover, the field of research is vast and we are few. One consequence of that is that citations, used by some institutions for bibliometric assessments, can be relatively small.

Going forward, there is an onus on all of us who are committed to this work to do our utmost to secure the reputation, and thereby the future, of the field. That is in every child rights researchers’ interest. It is also in children’s. If we do not do this, children’s rights and their own perspectives will continue to be assimilated, and thus marginalised, in other work. However, 30 years on, notwithstanding the many achievements and contributions to theory, knowledge and methods, the cloud of being a “second class” citizen, hangs over us. It is often said that children are “beings” not “becomings”, as a way of encouraging us to recognise their present lives as a serious and important focus of inquiry. Likewise Onora O’Neill (1988) has argued that children should not have rights on the basis that they are not like other marginalised groups since their main remedy “is to grow up”. That attitude, often unspoken, prevails in many of our “pure” research disciplines. We, the children’s rights research community, think differently. Research shows that if children’s rights are not respected during childhood, many do not grow up at all and others are so damaged by the abuse that they endure (irrespective of some of the duties placed on adults), that they suffer needlessly and endlessly at a cost to them, their families and society itself. Our work is important. Our field is critical now more than ever. Yet our work is often work undervalued. Going forward, we suggest a charter for children’s rights researchers based on four core principles:

**Respect:** Our field of study is one of the most diverse of any of the social sciences. The reviews in this special issue confirm this. Children’s rights research is neither the preserve of one discipline nor dominated by any single field. Unlike the broader field of human rights, we are populated not just or even mainly by lawyers but also by sociologists, criminologists, educationalists, social workers and psychologists. We have diverse ontological and epistemological positions. We see the world differently. We need to celebrate that and be respectful of these different approaches when we read and engage with the work. Robust critique is important (not least from reviewers) but it should be respectful and supportive.
Careers are not built on bringing other people down but on original contributions to the existing body of knowledge.

**Rigour:** This special issue demonstrates that the field is replete with research of the highest quality. However, as editors, reading hundreds of submissions and reviews each year, it is clear that not all of the work that is submitted to us is as rigorous or robust as it should be — not just for publication but for the reputation of our field. Often times, the legal analysis, from those who do not have a legal background, is simply too superficial or uncritical or the study’s methods (especially the approach to data analysis when the submissions come from those with a legal background) inadequately explained or limitations ignored. While we welcome the intersection of the social and legal in the research that we publish, we have a concern that the social sciences research is sometimes not legally accurate while the legal research that involves empirical work is not always methodologically sound. If you are combining these approaches, it is important to do so with rigour, drawing extensively on the relevant expertise of colleagues and offering your own expertise to others.

**Rectitude:** There is a growing body of work on rights-respecting research, which stresses that the research that we conduct should not breach the rights of children (Beazeley et al., 2009; Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). However, we as a research community also need to behave with rectitude towards one another. At its most fundamental, that means that it is completely unacceptable to use another’s work and pass it off as your own, directly or indirectly. A reviewer picking up on this (as we have witnessed on more than one occasion) is not just embarrassing; it can be death to a career. And it damages the reputation of our field. More commonly, the approach that lacks rectitude is one where a contribution is not acknowledged or downplayed. There is good guidance available on who should be named as an author and who should be acknowledged. See for example, the guidance from the British Sociological Association (https://www.britsoc.co.uk/publications/guidelines-reports/authorship-guidelines.aspx). We urge our authors to read it and use it.

**Relevance:** Our research has to be relevant. It has to respond to the challenges children face, and to the legal, political, economic, social and cultural climates in which they live. Whilst the broad church of children’s rights scholarship should be embraced (whether it be conceptual, theoretical, doctrinal or empirical), we need to remain mindful of who and what our research is for, of what it is actually achieving. We need to reflect critically on whether our established methods and frameworks are fit for purpose and seek out fresh training and perspectives to update.
our skills and deepen our insights. Moreover, by actively engaging children in setting (rather than just responding to) our research agendas, and by investing time in cultivating a diverse range of partnerships with academics, practitioners and policy-makers in other countries and disciplines, we can react in a timely and appropriate way to issues as they arise.

Acknowledgement

We are extremely grateful to Deborah Lawson for her insightful feedback on an earlier draft of this editorial.

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