
This is a most enlightening book. It is about how children and young people communicate about matters of importance or difficulty, how they decide what to tell adults and what not to tell them, how they organise themselves, their lives, and about how they deal with conflict in their own relationships and in the world around them. It is also about how adults can interact effectively with children and young people, both on an individual and societal level, in ways that are sensitive to their feelings and empowering and supportive of their attempts to be autonomous. The starting point for the book is that children are both ‘becomings’ and also ‘beings’. The contributors all recognise that children have things to teach adult society.

The book has nine main contributions (plus an editorial introduction and conclusion). The contributors offer perspectives drawn from their disciplines, which include psychology, linguistics, geography, anthropology and social work, to give us a more rounded contextual understanding of children’s participation than is often the case. The areas addressed also focus on questions that can be neglected — issues of refugees and asylum, and children and young people’s use of language. Thomas notes in his ‘Introduction’ that despite the emphasis on participation, much of this is currently adult-led and ‘spaces for children’s autonomous activity… are severely restricted in all parts of the world’ (p. 2). This collection seeks to offer a corrective to this distortion, and certainly succeeds in this ambition.

Roger Hart (ch.1) argues for the need to address not just children’s voices in ‘governance’ but also their participation in ‘civil society’ (p. 7). He offers a useful summary of some of the changes that have been occurring in the nature of children’s social participation in the family, the school, after-school activities, membership organisations, religious institutions, community holiday rituals and through the internet. He contrasts childhood today with his own experiences of childhood, certainly a novel approach. It is, of course, a limited benchmark, since he was a boy growing up in the UK! I fear he may remember his growing-up in 1950s Nottingham through rose-tinted spectacles: mine at the same time was less idyllic!

In chapter 2 Vicky Johnson writes about children and young people’s self-organisation. She draws on research conducted in Nepal and South Africa, as well as Sussex on the English south coast. Her key message is that researchers and practitioners ‘need to continue to listen to children’s own solutions and understand their realities in different environmental, cultural and political contexts’ (p. 42). She advocates more attention being paid to Article 15 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child – policies now so dominant which restrict children’s ‘space’ certainly take no account of this norm.
I found chapter 3, by Anne-Marie Smith, the most interesting in the book. It is based on ethnographic research conducted in Oaxaca City in Mexico. It focuses on the lives of displaced children of Loxicha, in particular their involvement in their community’s political struggle, and explores the challenges this involvement presents for existing notions of childhood and of child participation, as framed by the Convention. The children of Loxicha have played a key role in their community’s struggle, going on marches and participating in sit-ins and hunger strikes (several pictures are included to illustrate these activities). She draws on current debates in childhood studies and children’s rights advocacy to question the ways in which the childhoods experienced by Loxicha children are redefined to suit adult notions of ‘lost childhood’. This overlooks the complex and multi-layered nature of the children’s daily realities. She thus raises the important question – which permeates the whole book – ‘who sets the child participation agenda?’ (p. 49) To ignore the kind of participation practised by the Loxicha children is to ignore their voices, and this would breach Article 12 of the U.N. Convention.

The fourth chapter (by Jason Hart) examines the ways in which displaced children may take part in political violence. Discussion of ‘child soldiers’ often neglects the process of their mobilisation, and this will differ from conflict zone to conflict zone. Hart offers us a contribution towards an understanding of mobilisation. I must confess to belong to the school of thought which sees ‘fighting children’ as victims rather than agents. Hart acknowledges that ‘free choice’ is a complex concept, for adults as well as the young. His approach, influenced by Vygotsky, is to locate activities within environment. And it is to the environment of the refugee camp – he concentrates on one in Jordan for Palestinians – that he looks. Whilst his paper goes some way towards explaining the anger and frustration of displaced youth, it leaves me still wondering whether the ‘straight-18’ solution has been countered. It is striking that there is barely a mention of girls in this paper, though there is increasing focus on the vulnerability of young female recruits in armed conflict.

Two chapters on asylum follow. Both offer significant findings. Crawley relates in particular the experiences of children who because of appearance or personal history and thought not to be children, and so are treated as adults. For this group of children, a conceptualisation of childhood that forces them to be apolitical, asexual and passive has significant implications for their ability to rebuild their lives. Crawley’s paper is about the U.K. (more specifically England), where obligations to child asylum seekers are more generous than those which apply to adults. Because much hinges on age, there are many age-disputed cases (45 per cent in 2005). But, as Crawley points out, ‘while an individual’s chronological age has huge implications for the asylum process and for the provision of welfare and education support, it is much less significant for those children and young people who come from countries and cultures that do not attach the same importance to chronological age’. (p. 93)