

Book reviews

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John Wall, *Children's Rights, Today's Global Challenge*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017; 198 pp.
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In this volume, Wall skilfully takes the contested subject area of children's rights and makes it accessible to a wide range of readers without reducing the quality or complexity of the debates presented. The aims of the book are articulated clearly at the outset and primarily focus on a 'comprehensive exploration' of the children's rights movement (p. 2). Each chapter sets out relevant knowledge and background material to assist the reader to understand and engage with often intricate and multifaceted issues which surround children's rights today. The content is thought-provoking and calls for (as others have also done) a transformation of rights discourses to embrace what Wall terms 'Childism', where the inclusion of children in rights discourses extends beyond perspectives of concerns around welfare and protection and demands a shift in the ways that rights for all are conceived and constructed. Emblematic of a feminist ethic of care and Wall's previous work on ethics in childhood, Childism is defined at the outset and then used to challenge the dominant recurring emphasis on protection and participation. As a theoretical stance, Childism represents a paradigm shift that should not be underestimated in its impact and therefore could have assumed a more central role in the discussions and perhaps been more consistently applied throughout all the topics covered.

Throughout the chapters, Wall powerfully weaves case studies and examples of children's lived experiences to draw our attention to the positionality of children within existing rights structures. This makes the debates both personal and provocative and adds strength to his call for a transformation of approach. The contents of this volume provide the reader with an expansive scope, which includes historical contexts, theoretical underpinnings and contemporary topics such as child slavery, voting and education in a global environment. In the theoretical chapters, Wall usefully provides topic examples such as health through which to highlight controversial debates concerning what rights children lack, hold and the associated limitations of them. He highlights embedded tensions and contradictions such as that of providing the child with the right to a good death in privileged social contexts which do not acknowledge the mortality of children (p. 18).

In the chapter that critically explores education, Wall questions the universality of education as a right and draws our attention to its limitations when availability and access to education are not available for all. Wall points us to issues such as age, cost and gender, which ultimately render universality a socially relative concept making rights impossible to either enact or protect. The examples and arguments presented here speak to well-recognised limitations of universal rights legislation.

Child slavery is also interrogated in this volume. Here, Wall rebukes the notion that slavery is an historical and past evil, and reminds us of its very contemporary faces in sex work, domestic

servitude, and multifarious global commerce, where manufacturing can induce exploitative labour conditions for very young children. Resisting the temptation to construct these children only as passive victims, Wall reminds us of the agency of children and their right to choose work, as well as their capacity to resist exploitation even from their subordinate power positions. Wall highlights small but emerging advocacy movements on the part of child workers to counteract such exploitation and injustice. Children's capacity for morality and social justice in these endeavours is explicit.

Children's suffrage is also considered in this volume where children's right to vote is critically explored. This is arguably one of the most controversial rights in that the power to vote can change nation states and therefore represent a potentially destabilising right in contrast to other mundane and familiar ones. Wall initially highlights the failure of universal suffrage before exploring the various arguments which impede voting rights for children. These arguments range from historical precedence, children's competencies and knowledge, as well as their dependent status through to protectionist perspectives. Wall, perhaps optimistically, identifies examples where he feels political change is beginning to occur, which might eventually lead to children's right to vote. Here, Wall also outlines his own argument for proxy votes and it is in this chapter that Wall's own values and beliefs are most explicit.

Given that a focus of the book is an exploration of rights made accessible and useful to students and academics alike, it is somewhat surprising that Wall does not make greater use of referencing to guide students into wider debates of the topics and themes he explores here. Greater signposting to writers within childhood studies and other applied disciplines would have been a useful addition while exploring concepts such as relational interdependence (p. 36), but Wall's passion and eloquence make each chapter informative and thought-provoking.

This text is essential to have on the library shelves of any institution which explores childhoods, rights discourses and legislation and is already identified as essential reading for my own students. It eloquently outlines the emergence of rights as well as its ambiguities and current challenges. Without sentimentality, Wall articulates the plight of children globally and calls for the transformation of children's rights to be the catalyst to reshape human rights for both adult and child. He dares to vision a world that for some would represent a less stable one, one where children are empowered to change their societies and I, for one, admire and echo his call.