

International Perspectives on
Early Childhood Education and Development 42

Linda Mahony
Sharynne McLeod
Andi Salamon
Jenny Dwyer *Editors*


Early Childhood Voices: Children, Families, Professionals

 Springer

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Early childhood education in many countries has been built upon a strong tradition of a materially rich and active play-based pedagogy and environment. Yet what has become visible within the profession, is essentially a Western view of childhood preschool education and school education.

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Early Childhood Voices: Children, Families, Professionals


 Springer

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Foreword

This book is a remarkable achievement. It draws together scholars from an array of disciplines, from across the world, to interrogate what it means to elicit and engage meaningfully with the many languages of very young children. Steeped in a commitment to children's rights, each chapter is also mapped against the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). These Goals '*recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth—all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests*' (United Nations, 2015).

It is a testament to the richness and breadth of this edited collection that it traverses multiple dimensions of children's experiences on the planet, including home and family, the early childhood setting, friendship, the experience and aftermath of climate change impacts, and the disruption of the pandemic. It asks us to consider how we can address gender inequalities by actively engaging young girls in the early childhood setting in STEM. It asks us to consider how the mathematical graphics of young children are a form of children's expression. Many of the chapters provoke us to be better at redressing the inequalities and/or disadvantages children might face.

A theme that runs throughout the book is the central role of communication. As Kemmis and Salamon remind us, the practice of communication not only creates a pathway for children to participate in the decisions that affect them (United Nations, 1989, Article 3), but it is also integral to our understanding and construction of the world. Through thoughtful and research-informed contributions, the book's authors cause us to reflect upon how we, as adults, might consciously tune in and recognise children's many languages, including the embodied social and emotional language (Salamon) that accompanies or precedes verbal language. A number of chapters offer specific models or tools that we can draw upon to better obtain children's insights and perspectives. The framework for children's participation proposed by Ward and Lundy, for example, not only creates the conditions which invite and validate children's perspectives but also recognises that adults may need to play an additional role in providing children access to information that enables them to form a view.

As language plays such a central role in communication, other chapters specifically address issues concerning children's speech and language including interventions for children's language acquisition. Some of these contributions illuminate the multilingual worlds that children inhabit and the multilingualism that many children practice and are adept in. Children's right to maintain their home language is highlighted. These chapters are written with a consciousness of the trap of cultural specificity and how this can colour or limit our capacity as adult 'experts' to closely listen to children and, if required, provide appropriate support for speech development.

The rich insights to be gained from these collective offerings underscore both universality and particularity. Through these writings we can see where a shared experience such as the pandemic gave rise to unique and creative responses to reaching children and their families so that children could continue their educations (United Nations, 1989, Article 29), while also bringing into sharp relief the inequalities that exist within and between nations that the SDGs exhort us to address.

It is incumbent upon adults to uphold children's rights and to design and implement strategies that strive to attain the SDGs. Professionals who work with young children need to consciously seek ways to activate children's rights backed by, as Downey et al. remind us, leadership that ensures ethical practices towards children. In doing so, we not only respect the right of the individual child, but we also work towards the collective good of all children.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge to all the authors that I felt honoured to be invited to write the foreword for this book, and I am deeply appreciative of its content.

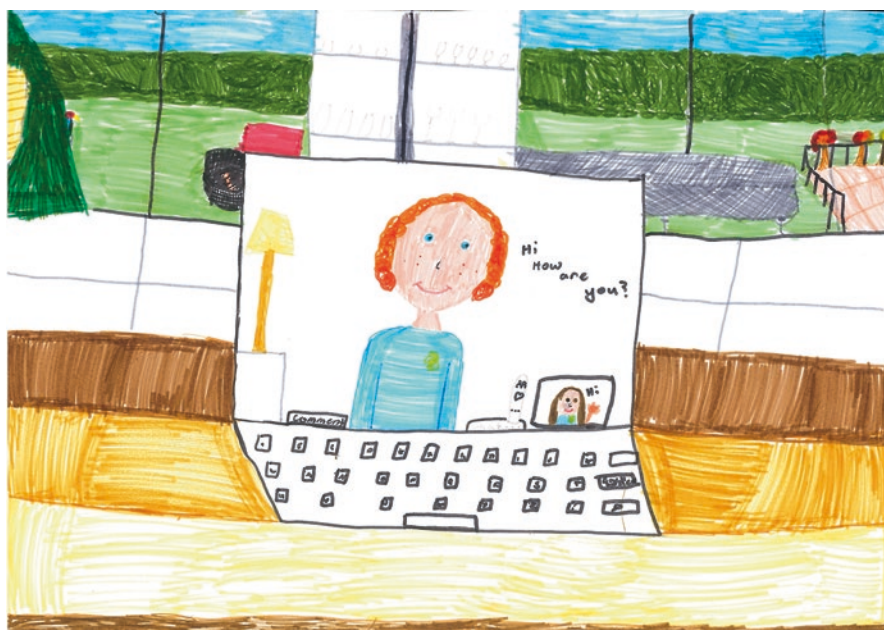
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- United Nations. (2015). *Sustainable development: The 17 goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Preface



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It's a new way of talking now. It's just how we do it now. (Elsie Hey-Cunningham, aged 9 from Australia)

We are proud to be the editors of this revolutionary interdisciplinary book that gives voice to young children titled: *Early Childhood Voices: Children, Families, Professionals*. The chapters present research to promote social justice and improve the lives of children, their families, and professionals who work with them.

The following words capture the processes undertaken to write and edit this book: collaborative—interdisciplinary—international—online

The image drawn by Elsie (above) is an accurate representation of the online comradery and collaboration involved in compiling this book. The four editors were in different cities across Australia. The 18 chapters were written by 46 authors from 12 countries; specifically, Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada, Iceland, Jamaica, Rwanda, South Africa, the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland, Scotland), and Vietnam. All the authors have focused on young children; however, their disciplinary backgrounds are diverse, including early childhood education and care, education, law, human rights, speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, psychology, social work, linguistics, interpreting, and philosophy. The insightful reviewers added more disciplinary backgrounds.

Many of the chapters include the voices of children, families, and professionals. Sometimes their voices have been transcribed and presented as quotes. Other times their voices have been presented “regardless of frontiers” (United Nations, 1989, Article 13) and include photographs, drawings, and images. Therefore, this book has been prepared through respectful listening to diverse perspectives.

Each chapter author was tasked with aligning their work with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), the United Nations’ “blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet,” and Chap. 1 summarises the SDGs addressed in each chapter. Consequently, the messages contained within this book promote the importance of children, the importance of early childhood, the importance of listening to the voices of young children, and the importance of people who support and embrace children—their families, professionals, and communities.

This book was conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in 2020 during the Early Childhood Voices Conference (ECV2020). ECV2020 was hosted to share research that could not be presented at national and international conferences because they had been cancelled due to travel restrictions. ECV2020 was successful beyond all expectations. It included eight keynote presentations (with nine invited speakers) and 89 oral presentations. There were 2847 people registered to attend ECV2020 from 70 countries, and during the week of the conference, there were 9806 views of the conference web pages with the top 10 countries being Australia, the United States, the UK, New Zealand, Canada, Malaysia, Iceland, Finland, Norway, and the Netherlands. The richness and diversity of the presentations and the online commentary from attendees via social media, emails, and other conversations led our editorial team to consider capturing learning from some of the presentations within a book. We are grateful to ARC Laureate Professor Marilyn Fleer for her encouragement and support leading to gaining a contract with Springer to publish this book within the series titled: *International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development*. More details about the Early Childhood Voices Conferences and the Charles Sturt University Early Childhood Interdisciplinary Research Group can be found in Chap. 18 of this volume and <http://csu.edu.au>; <https://earlychildhoodresearch.csu.domains/>

We hope that readers from across the world are inspired by the international interdisciplinary collaborative efforts of the chapter authors to promote the importance of early childhood voices.

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June 2023

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United Nations. (2015). *Sustainable development: The 17 goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

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This book is possible due to the commitment of the authors who work unrelentingly to create a better life for young children, their families, and professionals. We value their work in the realisation of this book.

We acknowledge the voices and perspectives of a vast range of people who listen to children's voices across multiple disciplines internationally, highlighting the practical application of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

We acknowledge the peer reviewers who generously gave their time and shared their expert knowledge in reviewing the chapters: Nadia Breese, Mandy Cooke, Michael Curtin, Jessamy Davies, Lysa Dealtry, Josephine Deguara, Jenny Dwyer, Angela Fenton, Alma Fleet, Leanne Gibbs, Carolyn Gregoric, Suzanne C. Hopf, Huong Le, Linda Mahony, Laura McFarland, Sharynne McLeod, Elizabeth Murray, Andi Salamon, Maryanne Theobald, Natalie Thompson, Carmel Ward, Karla N. Washington, Linda Willis, and Sandi Wong.

We acknowledge the expert editing advice of Mark Filmer.

Linda Mahony welcomed her beautiful granddaughter Molly during the production of this book, which is the reason why this book is important.

Sharynne McLeod thanks David, Brendon, and Jessica for their unfailing support and encouragement and the many children who inspire her.

Andi Salamon acknowledges and thanks all the children, families, and colleagues who have helped her better understand other voices in professional early years practice and life.

Jenny Dwyer acknowledges the diverse international voices within her world, particularly the *hundred languages* of Lucía, Rose, Amelie, Isabella, and Julian.

Thank you all for helping us listen to the voices of young children, families, and professionals to promote social justice and improve their lives.

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- United Nations. (2015). *Sustainable development: The 17 goals*. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

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Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

Linda Mahony, EdD, is a senior lecturer in professional experience at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia. She has over 30 years' experience in early years education with 20 years as a classroom teacher of young children. This has given her insight into the lived experiences of teachers and their important work with young children and their families. Linda's research has a social justice and equity perspective and focuses on the nexus between early childhood or school and family to explore teachers' pedagogical practices for promoting social and emotional well-being and learning for young children experiencing parental separation and divorce, and partnerships with family and community so that these young children can break through the barriers to their well-being and learning.

Sharynne McLeod, PhD, is a speech-language pathologist and distinguished professor of speech and language acquisition at Charles Sturt University, Australia. She is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the Royal Society of New South Wales, was an Australian Research Council Future Fellow, and has received Honours of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and Life Membership of Speech Pathology Australia. Her research primarily focuses on listening to children and supporting children's communication, speech, and multilingualism. She has advocated for communication rights at the United Nations and the World Health Organization. The Australian Newspaper named her Australia's Research Field Leader in Audiology, Speech and Language Pathology (2018, 2019, 2020, 2022) and Best in the World based on the "quality, volume and impact" of research in the field (2019, 2023).

Andi Salamon, PhD, is an early childhood teacher and senior lecturer who taught education studies at Charles Sturt University during the writing of this book. She has co-edited a book as part of the Routledge Thinking about Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education series focusing on multiple identities in early childhood. This understanding of the multiplicity of early childhood identities helps inform a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of early childhood voices, as do over 20 years' experience as a teacher, director, leader, and researcher in the field. Her doctoral study became the springboard to her 2019 Jean Denton Memorial Scholarship research project, where Andi continued to advocate for infants' rights and quality early years experiences. She brings her passion to uphold children's optimal learning into practice with pre-service teachers.

Jenny Dwyer is an early childhood teacher with over 30 years' experience working in a wide range of early childhood contexts. She has worked as a lecturer in early childhood at Charles Sturt University for over 10 years and investigates young children's mathematics play and learning. Her focus is recognising and valuing the importance of the rights of the child, who, from birth, is capable of learning and communicating through multiple languages. Jenny's interest extends to children's ability to use languages and mental imagery to develop abstract thinking and symbolic thought as expressed through imaginary play and their use of drawn symbols and signs as the foundation for understanding the abstract nature of mathematics. Jenny's research examines the socio-cultural influences on children's mathematical signs and symbols within their play, known as mathematical graphicacy, which helps develop abstract thinking and symbolic thought viewed as being necessary for learning mathematic notation in later years.

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Part I
Listening to Children

Chapter 1

Why the Voices of Young Children Matter



Linda Mahony , Sharynne McLeod , Andi Salamon , and Jenny Dwyer 

Abstract Over 30 years have passed since the introduction of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989). However, there remains a paucity of evidence-based literature informing professionals who work with our youngest children. Young children are the people of today who form the foundation of our future society and are active participants and subjects with their own agency. This introductory chapter provides philosophical and theoretical perspectives underpinning the consideration of early childhood voices, drawing on the CRC (United Nations, 1989) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Together, these frameworks provide a shared vision for equity, peace, and justice for all while integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability. This chapter explores ways of perceiving the concepts of listening and children’s voices to transform practice so that children’s lives are improved and to ensure no one is left behind. Children’s voices are viewed holistically and are evident within complex and constantly changing landscapes. This introductory chapter aims to highlight the importance of listening to our youngest children. It also prefaces subsequent chapters that focus on how professionals work to promote children’s voice and uphold children’s rights in the context of the SDGs with a view to improve the lives of young children, their families, and professionals who work with them.

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Keywords Children's voices · Convention on the Rights of the Child · Sustainable Development Goals · Early childhood · Social justice · Advocacy

Introduction

Young children are the foundation of our future society. The importance of listening to children and young people has received considerable attention. However, little has been written about listening to our youngest children (birth to eight years) and the perspectives of their families and the professionals who work with them. This book explores theoretical and practical issues of listening to children, families, and professionals who work with young children to promote social justice and improve their lives. Listening is explored across multiple disciplines internationally and highlights the practical application of the SDGs in the context of the CRC.

Early Childhood Voices: Children, Families, Professionals is a revolutionary book that explores innovations, theories, and partnerships to improve the lives of young children (birth to eight years), their families, and professionals who work with them. This international multidisciplinary book draws on the voices of children, families, early childhood educators, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, and multidisciplinary teams from countries as diverse as Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Canada, Iceland, the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland and Scotland), South Africa, Rwanda, Jamaica, and Vietnam.

This chapter begins by providing philosophical and theoretical perspectives underpinning the consideration of early childhood voices, drawing on the CRC (United Nations, 1989) and the SDGs (United Nations, 2015). Together, these frameworks provide a shared vision for equity, peace, and justice for all while integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions of sustainability. We then explore how and why practitioners listen to young children and how this informs practice. Finally, an overview of subsequent chapters is provided. Subsequent chapters highlight how the CRC and SDGs are enacted and brought to life from multidisciplinary perspectives across the world. This edited book captures the multidisciplinary perspectives of early childhood educators, speech-language pathologists, and multidisciplinary teams from 12 countries. Topics addressed include giving children a voice, methods for listening to and documenting young children's perspectives, and listening to and working in partnership with families, educators, and professionals, all working to improve the lives of children and their families. Chapters address wellness, well-being, and development of young children and their families across multiple dimensions, including physical, social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and environmental. The chapters in this edited book are outcomes focused and provide tangible evidence-based actions for educators, speech-language pathologists, and other professionals to enact in their work with young children and their families with an overarching goal to improve their lives and ensure no one is left behind.

The History and Purpose of the CRC and SDGs

Almost 2.4 billion of the world's population is under 18 years of age with 656 million of these being children under five (UNICEF, 2023). The world's total population is eight billion (8,045,311,447.5), so children represent more than a quarter of the world's population. At times, people describe children as the future of our world; however, they are integral to the world today, as eloquently described below:

Children are not the people of tomorrow, but are people of today. They have a right to be taken seriously, and to be treated with tenderness and respect. They should be allowed to grow into whoever they were meant to be—the unknown person inside each of them is our hope for the future (Korczak, 1929, p. 7 cited in Hammarberg, 2009).

This statement was written by Janusz Korczak, who has been described by the Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe as “our teacher on the rights of the child” (Hammarberg, 2009, p. 5) and who influenced subsequent work of the United Nations.

The CRC (United Nations, 1989) is the most significant and binding international document protecting the rights of children. It was adopted by the United Nations in 1989 after a process of development that began a decade earlier during the International Year of the Child. The CRC contains 54 Articles, and States Parties are required to send reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child to document steps that they are undertaking to “put the Convention into effect and on progress in the enjoyment of children's rights in their territories” (United Nations, 2023). There are four general principles enshrined in the CRC (United Nations, 2023): non-discrimination (Article 2); best interests of the child (Article 3); the right to life, survival, and development (Article 6); and the views of the child (Article 12).

This book is titled *Early Childhood Voices: Children, Families, Professionals* and draws inspiration from the fourth general principle, the views of the child, which is clearly articulated in Articles 12 and 13 as well as in the Preamble and other articles of the CRC (United Nations, 1989):

Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Article 13

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

Listening to Young Children to Inform Practice

As citizens of the world, young children have the same right to be heard as citizens of all ages. This perspective is in line with Articles 12 and 13 of the CRC (United Nations, 1989); however, it is often at direct odds with the diverse and divergent views and historical viewpoints, as well as practitioners' capacities and knowledge in how to enact this. Earlier traditions have suggested that children should be seen and not heard (Mirk, circa 1450/ Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Even though this is a historical conception, threads of its impact on society remain 500 years later, and the question of listening to children in authentic and critical ways is an ongoing challenge. Young children are aware when they have not been heard or their voice given value to be acted upon. Article 12 of the CRC (United Nations, 1989) makes it clear that human rights apply to young children as well as adults and children should be seen and heard through their diverse agentic and expressive modes of communication.

Honouring the voices of young children can only occur when they are valued, noticed, and listened to; however, the everyday (significant) voices of young children are frequently missed. This means that what matters to young children is also missed when professionals do not attend to their messages and ideas. Within education, listening has historically been a word associated with children listening to adults for learning purposes. The premise here is that young children will learn important things adults think matter for them to know. This viewpoint has, however, led to many adults not knowing what really matters to children and the development of a one-way communication channel, from adult to the child. However, children's emerging ideas and knowledge are instrumental in understanding what is noteworthy in their lives.

Listening to the voices of children is a central feature of the educational project of Reggio Emilia and informs respectful and reciprocal practices in working with young children (Rinaldi, 2001) in pedagogical early years' contexts. The *pedagogy of listening* has been formed by the Reggio Emilia approach. For these practitioners and pedagogists, listening is more than a linear transmission model; it is a way to co-create shared meanings between adults and children and to search for new meanings, imagined or real. This means changing our views of young children and suspending our judgements and perspectives of them (Curtis, 2017). Accordingly, listening to young children's voices becomes a metaphor for guiding adults' actions and for professionals to fulfil their responsibilities to honour children's voices through open, reflective, and critical practice. They can do so by using all their senses to closely observe the child's being and ways of communicating, and interpret their observations tentatively, to make conclusions about what the child *may* be thinking. Critical connections and lines of communication are made when there is a shared space between children and adults.

When practitioners listen to young children, it gives the young child visibility and helps to make apparent the infinite ways children can express their ideas and thoughts. Malaguzzi (2022) refers to this as the *hundred languages of children*, a