BOOK REVIEW

Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices

Pia Christensen and Allison James
Abingdon Routledge Publications (2017) pp.240
Paperback £29.99
ISBN 978-1-138-10089-3

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At the time, the first edition of this book represented 'a paradigm shift in childhood research' (Fry, 2002), where children were to be seen as 'actors in the meaning making of their everyday events... [and] competent... in their own representation in the research process' (Fry, 2002, p85). It is clear that the implications of this paradigm shift are still being explored in the field with the editors of this third edition explicitly stating that it 'continues the effort to deconstruct the essentialism with which the study of children and childhood has often been – and sometimes still is – approached' (Christensen and James, 2017, p4). This essentialism includes methodologies that promote adults as 'speakers for' the researched child, children as objects in the research process, a lack of acknowledgement as the child as a reflexive agent, and age-based and cognitive competence distinctions in their perceived abilities to be research active.

Therefore setting out to examine what was 'new' in this edition compared to the previous two is in many senses only part of the story, as it is not necessarily the differences that are most significant but the continuing, developing arguments about how we are defining children, how we are defining research, and how we are characterising or conceptualising the relationship between them? (ibid, p161). To these key issues, I would also add that the book questions the positioning of the researcher and the role of the child in the research process. These five issues are explored throughout the chapters, providing somewhat of a continuum from arguing against research 'on' children (Introduction), to examining research 'with' children (for example chapter 6), and then exploring possibilities for research 'by' children (chapter 9). The interaction of the five key issues and the continuum of children's involvement in research doesn't lead to a neat, tidy, fully coherent narrative or set of answers, and neither does it set out to. As the editors state in the introduction: 'the book sets out to explore the complexity of the epistemological and methodological questions that arise in contemporary research practices with children' (ibid, p2). This was most obvious in the first two chapters which have been placed together for this edition to provide a direct critical comparison of approaches. Chapter 1 focuses on longitudinal ethnography while chapter 2 argues for the viability of macro-analytical approaches. The positioning of these two chapters provides a significant opportunity for critical reflection on different methodological approaches and for grasping the complexity of the field, which would be highly relevant for teaching and discussion purposes. The editors do outline some specific new areas they set out to explore in this edition, one of which was the use of technology. I was amazed to learn that in the second edition in 2008

that there was 'no mention of mobile, smart, or personal devices, no social networking sites or online identities; just a mention of online surveys as an addition to the researchers toolbox' (ibid, p54). Therefore, it is absolutely essential the new edition covers these issues. However, it was with some relief that the two chapters devoted to technology steer clear of the often unfortunate trap of highlighting specific technologies, platforms or systems and focused instead on developing a clear and convincing argument that in the world of researching with children, technology should be considered not so much as a phenomena or tool but as a fundamental which is mediating children's lives. It is within this view of technology that Livingstone and Blum-Ross argue that 'at issue is the struggle to understand the altered materiality of our communication ecology or environment and thus the remediation of the condition through which childhood is constituted and lived' (ibid, p55). This argument seems to represent its own paradigm shift within the field (and arguably beyond), where understandings of boundaries between digital, real world, online and offline are increasingly blurred and juxtaposed.

This wasn't the only aspect of the book which has significance beyond the field of childhood studies. Another of these was the deliberate choice to integrate ethical discussion and debate within all the chapters. As with other research fields in the social sciences, the separation out of ethical discussion seems counterintuitive when all the interactions within childhood research, have by their very nature, an ethical dimension. A particularly good example of this was Connolly's chapter on Race, Gender and Critical Reflexivity with Young Children (Chapter 6) with debate as to his influence on the research as an adult white male, and the implications of this for the research.

There was also recognition of the importance of inter-disciplinary research, although through much of the book this was dealt with at an implicit level. It was a little surprising to find this theme most significantly discussed in the final chapter (Alderson, Utopian research with children), which could have come much earlier in the book given the strength of its philosophical and ethical ideas and the implications of these for all research with children. Finally, and most significantly in taking ideas from this book into more general educational research forums, were the arguments around the political position of the child. For me, this aligned beautifully with Freire and other critical theorists, although surprisingly they weren't referenced. However, recognising the child as a multi-voiced, active social player, a civic voice and socially competent in their ability to engage and participate has significance for all research. In particular it seems that the methodological and ethical implications of 'research with' are highly relevant to any research developed in relational, living, messy and complex contexts.