



Editorial

Children's Wellbeing and Children's Rights—A Nordic Perspective

Sarah Alminde * and Hanne Warming

Department of Social Sciences and Business, Roskilde University, Universitetsvej 1, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark; hannew@ruc.dk

* Correspondence: sararas@ruc.dk

Children's rights and wellbeing have increasingly attracted attention both politically and in the scholarly field. Despite almost all countries in the world having ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ensuring children's rights and wellbeing continues to pose challenges and dilemmas across the globe. This is even the case in countries regarded as frontrunners in the field, such as the Nordic countries. Drawing on experiences from six Nordic countries—Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands—this Special Issue addresses these challenges and dilemmas with a critical view of policies and practices in which children are still underprivileged and their perspectives silenced, and discusses how such challenges can be overcome.

The Nordic countries share a history of a strong welfare state and are ranked among the top countries in the world regarding happiness, trust, economic success, and political stability. Consequently, the Nordic countries frequently draw international attention for their child policies and are perceived as exemplary due to their high-quality universal daycare facilities and community schools. Furthermore, the Nordic countries have a long-standing commitment to child protection and welfare and are recognized as first-movers regarding children's rights, for instance, in outlawing physical punishment (Sweden) and the appointment of a state-funded children's ombudsman (Norway). Nevertheless, in practice, the Nordic countries have not yet reached the goal of ensuring that children enjoy equal rights on par with adults. They also struggle with various challenges to children's wellbeing, as well as dilemmas that arise in practice between the dual goals of protection/education and the fulfillment of participation rights, in addition to internal issues within each of these goals. In 12 papers, this Special Issue addresses children's wellbeing, rights, and the related challenges and dilemmas in the Nordic countries across a number of crucial contexts.

Article 12 of the UNCRC, concerning children's right to participation, has proven to be one of the most difficult articles to implement in policies and practice. Several articles in this Special Issue address challenges related to ensuring children's right to participation across various contexts, including daycare (Rasmussen and Schmidt 2024; Røn-Larsen and Stanek 2024; Sevon et al. 2024), school (Steensen and Helms 2024), social work (Olesen and Videt 2024; Ingimarsdóttir and Egilson 2024), family law (Alminde 2024), and family life (Gaini 2024). A common theme among the contributions is that they demonstrate that ensuring children's right to participation presents practical and legal challenges, and that it entails more than simply stating the right to participation.

Some of these challenges are connected to adultist assumptions and social norms in which the adult point of view is privileged, leading to the undermining or silencing of children's perspectives. Several authors (Biswas et al. 2024; Alminde 2024; Gaini 2024; Sundhall and Hillén 2024) in their contributions to this Special Issue take a critical stance toward this adultism and advocate for a more child-centric policy and practice focus as a path to ensuring children's right to participation and children's wellbeing.



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Biswas, Florio, Caso, Castelli, and Iacobino offer an instrument to monitor adultism as a basis for changes toward a more child-centric culture. In their paper “The Adultcentrism Scale: A Potential Contributor to Advancing Children’s Participation Rights in Nordic Contexts”, they present ‘The Adultcentrism Scale’ research tool. This research tool can be used to evaluate the presence of adult-centric bias in adults in relation to children and can be helpful in understanding the socio-psychological or cultural–psychological dimensions of educational (power) relations.

In the paper “Beyond the Shadow of Adults—Youth, Adultism, and Human Rights in the Contemporary Faroe Islands”, Gaini discusses young people’s human rights situation in the Faroe Islands today, addressing youth participation issues from a cultural adultism perspective. It is argued that local cultural values and intergenerational relations within families influence the multilayered and shifting nature of ‘Faroese adultism’.

Childism and adultism are also crucial concepts in the paper “Listening to Children: A Childist Analysis of Children’s Participation in Family Law Cases”. In this paper, Alminde analyzes children’s participation in family law cases in Denmark. Drawing on the concepts of childism and adultism, the analysis highlights how power structures in the family law system privilege adult comprehension while undermining children’s perspectives. Furthermore, it is argued that “listening emergent” to children can offer a path to deconstructing the norms and structures that undermine and exclude children’s views.

Similarly, Rasmussen and Schmidt (2024), in the paper “Access to Children’s Perspectives?”, demonstrate how children’s perspectives emerge from and become entangled with pedagogues, ethics, spaces, materials, and discourse in Danish daycare centers. They argue that the task is not only about gaining access to children’s perspectives but also about being preoccupied with the interactions through which children’s perspectives can emerge. This involves a critical examination of the structures and basic assumptions manifesting in the daily life of daycare centers, as these can result in the subordination of children and their perspectives.

In the paper “Situated Pedagogy in Danish Daycare—The Politics of Everyday Life”, Røn-Larsen and Stanek (2024) analyze the possibilities and obstacles in pedagogical practices in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) concerning the development of relevant opportunities for participation for all children. The analysis shows that situated pedagogy concerning the important “tiny little things” is under severe pressure. This is especially evident for children for whom there are concerns and where the focus has shifted from supporting the children’s own engagement to individual assessment and interventions. Consequently, these children’s perspectives are overlooked in pedagogical practice, depriving them of the development of agency and influence in their lives.

In the context of Finnish ECEC, Sevón et al. (2024), in the paper “Dilemmas Related to Young Children’s Participation and Rights: A Discourse Analysis Study of Present and Future Professionals Working with Children”, analyze counter-discourses regarding the realization of children’s participation through interviews with present and future education professionals in Finland. The analysis shows that the activities of professionals and other workers in Finnish ECEC communities are partly built on conflicting assumptions about what children’s participation entails.

Steensen and Helms (2024) explore students’ experiences of parent–teacher conferences in Denmark, drawing on Rosa’s theory of alienation and resonance. In their paper “The Right to Be a Subject of Your Own Life—A Study of Parent–Teacher Conferences in Danish Lower Secondary Education”, they show that there is limited opportunity for students to express their views, thus limiting subjectification and resonance. They subsequently advocate for rethinking parent–teacher conferences to create opportunities for subjectification and resonance.

Turning to children in care, Olesen and Videt (2024), in their paper “Monitoring of Norwegian Foster Homes”, interview children and youths who have experienced what they consider to be abusive behavior from foster parents. Their analysis shows that a common narrative in the youths’ accounts is one of mistrust toward social workers and monitoring

officers, which relates to a general distrust of the child welfare service. Consequently, young individuals are reluctant to disclose to monitoring officers how they truly experience their situation in their foster homes.

Children in care are also the focus of the paper “Not Everyone Can Become a Rocket Scientist: Decolonizing Children’s Rights in Ethnic Minority Childhoods in Norway”. Here, Ursin and Lyså (2024) reflect on contemporary discourses in Norway connected to ethnic minority childhoods and children’s rights to education and work. The analysis shows that contemporary Western discourses—such as individualism, self-autonomy, and children as human capital—paradoxically curtail the educational rights and trajectories of ethnic minority children in foster care in Norway in unforeseen and unfortunate ways.

Similarly, Ingimarsdóttir and Egilson (2024), in the paper “I Just Want to Live My Life”: Young Disabled People’s Possibilities for Achieving Participation and Wellness”, explore disabled children’s and adolescents’ possibilities for participation and identify the practices and policies that affect their participation and how these are enacted in Iceland. The study shows that young disabled people’s opportunities for participation at home, school, and in their neighborhoods are affected by complex dynamics between personal and environmental factors. Whether and how the young people’s disability-related rights are enacted depends on socio-cultural and material arrangements as well as parents’ knowledge of the welfare system.

In the paper “The Punishable Child in Sweden—The Tidö Agreement from a Children’s Rights Perspective”, Sundhall and Hillén (2024) analyze the political document, the Tidö Agreement, focusing on its articulations of youth criminality. They find that rather than focusing on prevention and ensuring children’s equal opportunities to prepare them for their future, the Tidö Agreement emphasizes punishing children, which poses a challenge for children’s rights in Sweden.

Agergaard et al. (2024) argue that despite being an important arena in children’s lives, children’s participation in sports in Scandinavia is not very well researched. In their paper “Children’s Rights to and in Sport: A Comparative Analysis of Organizational Policies in the Scandinavian Countries”, they examine the organizational policies in Scandinavian sports to develop foundational knowledge about how the range of children’s rights to and in sports may be supported. Through a comparative analysis of key policy documents from the major sports confederations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, they identify a large variety of approaches and show that while the protection of children from presumed damaging experiences in competitive sports has received attention in Scandinavia, discussions about children’s rights to influence their sport have received little focus.

Together, the different contributions to this Special Issue not only document that children’s wellbeing and participation still pose significant challenges across various contexts, even in the Nordic (assumed child-friendly) countries, but also reveal considerable variations in childhood concerning their societal position. Although age persists as an axis of marginalization and discrimination, it intersects with other disadvantaged positions and categorizations. Further exploration, theorizing, and change regarding these structural dynamics are much needed for the purpose of achieving social justice for children.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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