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On April 12, 2016, I joined many others to celebrate the launch of Anne Smith’s book, Children’s Rights: Towards Social Justice, at the Royal Society rooms in Wellington. The occasion was marked by discussions closely reflecting the themes in this book—the enduring need for advocacy for children’s rights, the ability of children themselves to express their opinions and contribute to their worlds, ongoing critique at the lack of policy support for children’s rights in New Zealand, and the persistent prevalence of child poverty. Little did I know at that event (as I suspect was the case for many others) that Anne was facing advanced and aggressive cancer, and, just over a month later, she died (May 22, 2016).

Anne Smith’s book—her last—therefore becomes even more significant in light of her passing. It follows six previously published sole-authored and co-edited books, alongside numerous articles. As such, it deserves attention as it provides a cohesive and summative reflection of her life’s work in advocating for children’s rights. Children’s Rights: Towards Social Justice is a comprehensive and valuable contribution to the international literature on children’s rights. Its most useful attribute is the demonstration of how the ideas of children’s rights can be implemented in contexts as varied as families, educational settings, within health and the workplace. Drawing on evidence-based research, the book paints a picture of what a children’s rights approach look like in these multiple contexts and addresses many of the challenges this approach faces.

The book begins with an introduction to children’s rights and its origins founded on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]. Smith refers to UNCRC at length in this book, explaining that “UNCRC provides a holistic, unifying vision of children’s rights and childhood, and provides child advocates, professionals working with children, and policy-makers, with a direction...
and moral imperative for improving policies and practice for children” (p. 155). Alongside UNCRC, Smith links the ‘rights-based approach’ she advocates for in this book with a Childhood Studies approach (also known as the ‘sociology of childhood’), drawing on the seminal work Alison James and colleagues (James et al. 1998), and also sociocultural theory derived from Vygotsky and others. Together these three frameworks provide a position that recognises children as active in the construction of their own live, as competent social actors with voice and agency, and that understanding children involves looking at the complexity of their lives within social and historical contexts. This introduction sets the scene for a book that illustrates what ‘living rights’—those that are interpreted and enacted within children’s daily lives—look like for children in diverse contexts and places.

The book elaborates on this framework by exploring living rights within six different contexts—families (Chap. 2), early childhood education and care (Chap. 3), school (Chap. 4), child protection services (Chap. 5), health (Chap. 6), and the workplace (Chap. 7). In each of these chapters, Smith draws on a rich research evidence base to provide a ‘bottom up perspective on children’s rights’ (Harcourt and Hägglund 2013) which is centred on the lived experiences of children’s daily lives and their rights for protection, provision, and participation. For example, while the case has perhaps previously been made strongly for these rights in early childhood (see Chap. 3), schools (see Chap. 4), and health (Chap. 6), Smith’s elaboration on children’s rights in the workplace in Chap. 7 enters much more controversial territory by discussing working children in both the minority and majority world. This discussion reveals that it is not only children in sweatshops in minority countries who are exploited, but that many 11–15 years olds in part-time employment in countries like New Zealand are exposed to poor working conditions and pay with few options to address safety and work security. The chapter also illustrates how children are not merely dependents in such contexts but are responsible and active in working towards their rights in the workplace. The final chapter concludes by drawing together the key arguments and discussing what this means for children as citizens with rights-holding and responsibility-bearing roles in society, and also implications of this for research.

The book is underpinned by a number of principles including that children have the right for survival and development, deserve universality and respect, the right to ensure their best interests are served in policies and practices, and the right to be heard. One would hope these principles would be uncontroversial today. Yet recent events in New Zealand show that the debates remain very much alive. In the latter part of 2016, New Zealand’s Fifth Periodic Report on New Zealand’s response to UNCRC (and similarly, the naming of the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki) received strong critique by the United Nations Committee for its focus on ‘vulnerable’ children rather than the universality of rights for children. In addition, heated political debates about how child poverty could and should be measured in order to put in place policies to reduce such appalling rates were also topical. This shows that this book is still needed to counter views of children’s dependency, vulnerability and risk that prevail in many policies and institutions. As Smith succinctly states: “Too often a great focus on protecting vulnerable children fails to recognise children’s agency, restricts their freedom and privacy, and
disempowers them” (p. 158). And, as she illustrates in this book, it’s not for children do this alone—adults are integral to supporting children’s rights to be heard, respected and upheld. Her book therefore holds a challenge for all of us who work with children, as the job of establishing children’s rights in all spaces of society is far from over—what will we do with Anne Smith’s legacy of pointing this out?

References
