

The Kids Are in Charge: Activism and Power in Peru's Movement of Working Children

Jessica K. Taft (2019)

New York: New York University Press, 263 pages

ISBN: 978-1-4798-5450-9 (paperback)

Numerous publications in recent years have addressed the issue of children's activism in its diverse dimensions. Various monographs and articles have exposed and interpreted working children's activism, evidencing the significance of power relations and inequalities between adults and children for understanding the situation in which children find themselves. Is another book dealing with this phenomenon necessary? How might it still be possible to provoke fresh reflections and discover new paths that guide us towards the protection of working children and the transformation of individuals and institutions, and do it in an original manner?

The book under review is an excellent example of a positive answer to these questions. Among many publications devoted to children's activism, the book *The Kids Are in Charge* stands out with its narration, target group (children and adults), and message advocating for the practice of intergenerational activism. In the introduction, the author dedicates the book to both children and adults: "For all the kids raising their voices for justice and dignity and all the adults who listen and take them seriously" (p. 5). Doing so, she opens the space for intergenerational and equal explorations into and reinterpretations of childhood and adulthood.

The construction of the book rests on its two main sections, each featuring aptly selected texts framed by the section's title. The first section, *Alternative Visions of Childhood*, is divided into three sub-sections: *Learning with the Peruvian Movement of Working Children*; *Protagonismo and Work: Reimagining Childhood*; and *Equality and Horizontalism: Reimagining Intergenerational Relationships*. The second section, *The Practice of Intergenerational Activism*, consists of the sub-sections: *Teachers, Mothers, or Compañeros: Adult Roles in a Children's Movement*; *"The Kids Are in Charge" but "Adults Talk Too Much": The Everyday Dynamics of Age-Based Power and Struggles for Children's Dignity*; and *Citizenship: Transforming Individuals and Institutions*.

The book examines the movement of working children in Peru, taking the experiences of children and adults collaborating with them as a point of departure to discuss theoretical aspects, such as the conceptualizations of childhood in Peruvian society. The author provides a lively image of working children's lives that challenges the widespread perception of children as vulnerable and dependent on adults, instead showing them as activists aware of the inequalities between adults and children and the need to challenge these inequalities, proving their agency in social, economic and political life. Taft discusses the vital role of adults (*colaboradores*) in the movement, with a major focus on the issue of power relations and how they are mitigated in these intergenerational relations. The

impact of the presence of adolescents in the movement how this impacts child-adult symmetry is also addressed. The author then goes beyond the movement itself to consider its implications for other working children and the existing paradigm of childhood, reflecting on the movement's potential to reform the dominant approach to children's place in communities and the wider society.

Taft probes into the categories of childhood and adulthood, looking at them as age-based polarities which are sources of both strong identities and inequalities. Her book offers an insight into how adults and children within the movement of working children see children's role in the public sphere. It explores how they frame power relations between adults and children based on symmetry and egalitarian values, while identifying how these assumptions and approaches are translated into practice within the children's movement and their potential to impact children's situation in wider society.

The author concludes each chapter by identifying one of the most important aspects of the movement of working children: 1) its eroding impact on the dominant conceptualizations of childhood; 2) the challenges faced by working children connected with power relations between children and adults; and 3) the impact of the movement beyond the scope of its members' lives.

The book is very well grounded in theory and has immense cognitive value. It deals with problems and phenomena historically created through adults' hands and words that have inhibited the praxis of intergenerational activism because they expose violations of children's rights by those who ought to protect them. The author emphasizes how important a balanced approach to adults' role in activism is, and that the value of this activism relies on horizontal intergenerational cooperation.

Jessica K. Taft is careful to use the language of equality while at the same time drawing attention to the weight of keywords ascribed to the categories and theories to which the book refers. For example, analyzing the ideas related to children's equality and intergenerational horizontalism she writes, "I invite readers to consider the distance between these visions and their own experiences either as children or as adults interacting with children. In what ways do our (adults') habituated ways of engaging with kids deny them their dignity, underestimate their capacities, or ignore their insights? Why is thinking about children as equals so unsettling for many adults? How would the social and political institutions that structure adult-child interactions be different if we recognized children's equality?" (p. 86). These are brave questions, highly topical and important today for the popularization of this concept in daily practice.

I believe the book has an immense potential to inspire scholars, practitioners and readers searching for new issues and fields of exploration that shape childhood and children's rights studies. The author does an excellent job exposing the problems with having an incomplete understanding of children's activism against the background of theoretical and research concepts, models and approaches found in existing research. She mentions binary representations of children's activism as

either being manipulated by adults or rejecting any form of adult involvement, arguing that neither of these binaries is a valid or effective option.

I also believe the book to be particularly valuable through the perspective of contemporary non-discriminatory, participatory research with and on children and adolescents within the economic, social and political arenas and in the face of climate change. Children not only can become, but in today's complicated reality are becoming key political actors and activists—annoying some adults while opening the eyes of others. The book can also be a highly useful read for the students of educational and social work studies as well as for raising the competences of teachers and other professionals working with children.

Review by Urszula Markowska-Manista

Urszula Markowska-Manista, Ph.D. is a field researcher; Assistant Professor at the University of Warsaw, Poland; and Co-Director of M.A. Childhood Studies and Children's Rights at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam in Germany.