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Book Review: Reconceptualizing Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies

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***Reconceptualizing Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*, edited by Florian Esser, Meike S. Baader, Tanja Betz, and Beatrice Hungerland.
New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. 297 pp., \$160.00 (hardcover).**

The concept of children's agency is pivotal to the quarter-century old, still burgeoning, field of Childhood Studies. As an interdisciplinary approach to examining the generational cohort of children and adolescents, Childhood Studies places theoretical importance on children in existent cultural and global contexts. Agency, a concept that finds different expression across disciplines, is defined in Childhood Studies as the child's ability to initiate action in order to shape his or her social world and society. In this view, children are not independent from social structure and are not merely passive subjects of social science research, but purposeful actors in their own lives. By its title, *Reconceptualizing Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies* assumes a rich interdisciplinary exploration of historical backgrounds, current issues, and transnational views of Childhood Studies.

The substance of childhood agency is peppered with debate; notwithstanding, this volume plumbs theoretical depths without questioning the key prominence of agency in Childhood Studies. Using cross-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings, the book assembles chapters from international experts on Childhood Studies. Edited by German researchers Esser, Baader, Betz, and Hungerland, *Reconceptualizing Agency and Childhood* is divided into five sections. The first and largest section, comprised of six chapters, explores theoretical perspectives including feminist theories, critical realism, Western-centric traditions of children's vulnerability, and relational social thought. The second section, Children as Actors in Research, encourages researchers to authentically document children's voices. The third section of the volume traces historical perspectives on childhood agency, particularly in Germany, and examines how parenting programs are affected by prevailing thoughts on children's and parents' roles in decision making and limit setting. In section four, Transnational and Majority World Perspectives of Agency, children's vulnerability is weighed against their agency with reviews of studies examining contexts as varied as child soldiers in Mozambique and poverty-stricken children growing up in Bolivia. Agency in Institutions of Childhood, the final section of the volume, provides examples of how childhood agency manifests itself in preschool, elementary, and the criminal and family justice systems.

To be sure, the international and interdisciplinary approach taken by the volume and its thickly-packed theory make it somewhat inaccessible, though not impenetrable, to those outside the academic in-house discussions of Childhood Studies. The book contains heavy micro- and macro-sociological perspectives that may seem jargon-laden to those not on the front lines of childhood agency. This despite Alderson and Yoshida's diligence in addressing criticism that critical realism is "too abstract, too laden with jargon and simply an unhelpful, unnecessary, alternative sociology" (p. 75). *Reconceptualizing Agency and Childhood* is not a volume for parents or practitioners of childhood education and family science; theory, not application, moves the work from theme to theme.

Still, the adroit reader will undoubtedly discover nuggets of insight that inform or at the very least intrigue. In her chapter titled "Troubling Children's Voices in Research" Spyrou examines the ways children's "laughter, silence, jokes, inconsistency or partiality" (p. 107) invite child agency researchers to read the nuanced meanings of their young subjects' words, spoken or unspoken. Spyrou advocates avoiding transparent interpretations of children's words. Instead she calls for "troubling" or "looking beyond" those words to examine the ambiguities and contradictions in children's voices. Peeling away the layers allows us a closer look at the "complex and messy character of children's worlds and processes that produce their voices" (p. 116). Mey provides another gem, contending that it is "easy to make statements about seeing the world through [children's] eyes, but that we have to recognize the differences between how adults and children perceive things" (p. 150). Only then can we keep our "own memories of the experience of having been a child" (p. 157) from obscuring or prejudicing our conceptions and presumptions in Childhood Studies and child agency in particular.

With an understanding that its positioning is toward theory, not practice, the volume taken as a whole encourages a broader understanding of childhood agency but stops short of casting its net into wider waters of implementation or execution. What must one do to amplify the voices of children in political realms? Can childhood agency affect sociological or familial norms? In educational settings such as elementary school, how can children be more than "passive subjects of social structures and processes" (p. 258) to take a stronger role in their own learning? Can children, as actors, augment their power in current social contexts? How can children be "agentic in ways that help them thrive in adult-dominated contexts" (p. 287)? These questions dangle like marionettes from an inert puppeteer's palm, lacking the power, if not the will, to enact change. A practitioner, parent, or educational researcher who

wishes to empower children with agency must grasp at hints buried beneath the copious information if seeking practical application.

While no single theoretical voice or exclusive conceptual trajectory develops, the volume sounds with vibrant diversity in an implicit encouragement to broaden the scope of future research. Despite the title proclaiming reconceptualization, the gravamen of the work does not necessarily rethink the core of childhood agency, but widens the view of those who study its principles. The volume may not remove and recast bulwark concepts in childhood agency, but may act as a catalyst to new paths of inquiry.