This book focuses on rights of children from birth through age 17 by presenting qualitative research, case studies and quotes that provide a flavor of the dilemmas and practicalities that arise when attempting to bring a rights perspectives to a variety of contexts. The book is written in an interactive and easy-to-read style that would be accessible to anyone who works with children and is interested in learning more about children’s rights through the lens of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and its implications throughout the world. The book would also be useful reading for policymakers and practitioners who are interested in taking concrete steps to ensure that the goals outlined in the UNCRC are realized through policy and practice. The UNCRC identified three kinds of rights that constitute the book’s main themes: provision of basic needs to ensure children’s survival and development, protection of children from exploitation and abuse and children’s participation in making decisions that affect their lives.

From a teaching perspective, one of the most useful features of the book is the inclusion in each chapter of text boxes listing activities that would be excellent starting points for class discussions, paper topics, or essay exam questions. These activities pose questions that would help students to delve more deeply into the issues covered in the text. The book would be an appropriate text in advanced undergraduate or graduate seminars in a range of disciplines, including education, sociology, public policy, public health and child development.

The book is written from a United Kingdom perspective but examples from countries around the world are presented throughout. Chapter 1 introduces the key themes that are examined in more detail in the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 provides a history of both human rights in general as well as child rights in particular. An important distinction introduced in this chapter is the difference between liberty rights (i.e. rights to pursue one’s life without interference) and welfare rights (i.e. rights to a basic standard of living, health care, education and so forth). Chapter 3 summarizes major current debates regarding children’s rights such as ethical dilemmas inherent in children’s right to protection versus right to privacy. Chapter 4 focuses on what the authors refer to as children’s ‘voice’ or right to express their opinions and ideas. Chapter 5 describes children’s right to participate in making decisions that affect their education,
health and other important aspects of their lives. Chapter 6 summarizes controversies regarding children’s rights in the context of family life, including debate about government intervention in family life and what constitutes abuse and neglect in a range of contexts, especially when families’ ability to provide for children’s basic needs and protect them from exploitation is compromised by extreme poverty. Chapter 7 reflects back on the issues raised earlier in the book and provides examples of their application when working with children in varied settings (e.g. schools, health clinics, day care centers) and how the rights that are most salient depend on the economic and cultural contexts in which the work occurs.

The book touches on some ways to engage communities that do not accept the concept of children’s rights. For example, the authors present research from Bangladesh suggesting that referring to ‘duties’ and ‘responsibilities’ of adults in relation to children rather than children’s ‘rights’ may be a more successful approach in some communities to getting adults in power to behave in ways that would improve children’s lives. Given that many of the children’s rights described in the book will seem untenable to adults in positions of power, it would have been helpful to have even more suggestions for how to reframe children’s rights in culturally sensitive ways to make them more acceptable in a range of contexts.

Overall, this book reads as an accessible, engaging tutorial in altering one’s thinking and approach to interacting with children from a rights-based perspective. Readers are likely to be left with a better understanding of the controversies and dilemmas that arise when attempting to move from the concept of children’s rights to implementing in practice children’s rights into diverse domains within a society and in diverse societies around the world.

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