

Theorising in Educational Children's Rights Research

A Systematic Review of Publications 2012–2021

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Abstract

Child rights research has increased since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. Reviews of the research has indicated a lack of criticality and a reluctance to interrogate or challenge dominant views. Some scholars argue that this results from under theorisation, whereas other maintain that theorisation is abundant. The paradox suggesting that children's rights research can be both abundant and deficient in theory calls for a thorough discussion about theorisation. This systematic review engages in this debate by exploring what is positioned as "theory" in educational children's rights research, and what function theory has. Analysis determined that alignment with established theoretical approaches is uncommon. Previous research literature is instead often positioned as theory, mostly in combination with policy, law or an established theory. Main functions of theory are to construct the object of study

and to provide analysis support. Some uses of theory appear to be more powerful than others.

Keywords

children's rights – education – theory – theorisation – research field – Convention on the Rights of the Child – CRC

1 Introduction

Despite the increasing volume of child rights research over the past 30 years (Quennerstedt and Moody, 2020), much of the existent research seems to address the same types of issues. Tendencies toward “international consensus building” and “consensus thinking” around children's rights have been highlighted (Cordero Arce, 2015; Quennerstedt, 2013; Reynaert *et al.*, 2009). While consensus can affirm and strengthen central disciplinary positions or present a somewhat unified position on key issues, it can also contribute to a lack of criticality and reluctance to pursue lines of inquiry that interrogate, challenge, or contradict the dominant views. Scholars within the field generally support rights for children and the value of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989; Ferguson, 2013). Therefore, there may be a reticence to examine rights for children with the same level of criticality and rigorous debate that characterises other fields with an interest in children and childhood, due to the risk of rising questions about the legitimacy of rights for children on a broader level. Calling for ‘critical proponents’, Reynaert and colleagues (2012: 156) counter such worries: a critical approach to children's rights is one that –

... does not consider the basic assumptions fundamental to children's rights as ‘truths.’ Contrary, it means that we attempt to understand and interpret different social construction of children's rights, bringing into dialogue these different understandings and interpretations in order to comprehend better children's rights and how the children's rights framework can contribute to a greater respect for children.

Even child rights advocates are questioning whether a monocultural view of children's rights is the best way forward in ensuring positive outcomes for children (Faulkner and Nyamutata, 2020; Huijsmans, 2016). Liebel (2020), for example, maintains that critical approaches do not doubt or challenge

rights for children, but rather draw attention to their varying relevance and significance in children's differing life situations: 'rights must be critically questioned again and again regarding their appropriateness and claim to universality' (128).

Some scholars argue that the lack of criticism of problematic ideas in child rights research results from *absence of theory* or *under theorisation* (Cordero Arce, 2015; Reynaert *et al.*, 2009; Quennerstedt, 2011; 2013). It is also suggested that the Convention is treated as a theoretical framework, which outmanoeuvres other ways of framing research (Cordero Arce, 2015; Quennerstedt, 2013). Conversely, others maintain that children's rights theorisation is 'not scarce but rather abundant', occurring 'implicitly and explicitly' in research (Hanson and Peleg, 2020: 16). Less concerned with the need for specific child rights theorisation, they problematise the *adequacy* of current theories, as –

... theories in the field of children's rights can very well be borrowed or adapted from elsewhere. However, the importation of established theoretical frameworks might be inadequate to analyse and understand in sufficient detail the many various manifestations of children's rights.

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This echoes the theoretical challenges posed by Alanen (2016: 158) for relatively new research communities that 'need to rely on "borrowed" tools for its development of theory.' Therefore, Hanson and Peleg (2020) argue that it is not theories *per se* that are missing in children's rights studies. Rather, what is needed are reflections and discussions about the relevance, analytical qualities and explanatory powers of the theories that are used.

The paradox that suggests children's rights research can be both abundant and deficient in theory presents an important question and calls for a thorough discussion about theorisation. This paper contributes to this discussion by exploring what constitutes "theory" in the field, and how it is used. As the authors come from an education disciplinary background, the choice was made to narrow the scope of child rights inquiry and look specifically at educational children's rights research. The main aim is to provide an elaborated picture of:

- *what* is positioned as theory in educational children's rights research, and whether any *trends* or patterns can be identified,
- *what function* that which is positioned as theory has in the research.

Based on the mapping of theory positionings and functions, and on evaluation of potential contribution to furthering theorisation in the field, suggestions for how theorisation might be supported in educational children's research are offered.

2 Theory and Its Functions

When analysing theorisation and theory use, engagement with questions of what theory is and what the purposes of using theory are is necessary. Numerous scholars from a wide range of disciplines have addressed these complex issues (e.g., Sutton and Staw 1995; Ball, 2006; Sikes, 2006; Abend, 2008, Wright, 2008; Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2014; Rule and John, 2015). They all conclude that although theory is generally considered highly important in social research, there is no agreement on its meaning, let alone what a “good” theory is, or what can be achieved by bringing in theory.

2.1 *Different Understandings of Theory*

In a wider sense, theory can denote anything from the mundane idea of theory as a ‘guess’ (Weick 1995) or ‘intellectual endeavour’ (Thomas 1997), to scientific conceptions of theory as a distilled statement that holds transferable application to other settings, contexts and populations than that from which it was drawn (Collins and Stockton 2018). In academic literature, three characteristic features are often pointed out: theories are *abstract* since they transcend the singular; they provide a *gaze*; and they have *explanatory* power. Theory can be perceived as something that *precedes* research outcomes – as a driving force behind and in research or, alternatively, as the actual *outcome* of research (Abend, 2008). Dimiatridis and Kamberelis’ (2006) definition highlights the innovative power theories can have:

Theories are abstract sets of assumptions and assertions used to interpret and sometimes to explain, psychological, social, cultural and historical processes. Theories are tools to help us think about things in new ways. Good theories are useful (vii).

The above characteristics can be elaborated by looking closer at the main aspect in different understandings of theory. First, theory can be understood as a *general perspective* on the empirical/social world. Theory in this sense provides a perspective that is abstracted from the particular and can be used to approach the world and a wide range of happenings and matters. Second, theory can be seen as a *tentative explanation of something puzzling*, aiming to expand on what it is, what it consists of, how it works. Theory in this understanding explains the puzzling matter by proposing a logically connected system, of which it is part. Third, theory can be understood as providing an *explanation of why* something is the way it is or works the way it does. Understood in this way,

theory clarifies causal relations in the empirical/social world and can therefore predict how matters will unfold in the future. Fourth, theories can also be understood as the ultimate *outcome of research*. From this point of view, theory is generated through research, elaborates, and specifies the studied issue, offering expanded ways of making sense of the empirical world.

These different perceptions of theory overlap to some extent, but also differ by the level of abstraction from the topic of study, their core function and whether they precede/drive concrete research or are successively built throughout research processes (Abend, 2008; Watling and Lingard, 2012). More specifically, theory in the first and second senses are both seen to provide means for interpretation of the empirical/social world. However, the first is often a “grand” or “big T theory” (Schneberger *et al.*, 2009), while the second theorises a limited matter or field and is therefore usually a “little t theory”. Theories in the second sense have clearer explanatory ambition for the topic. The third meaning of theory highlights even more the explanatory function of theory, and seeks causal relations between variables, thereby striving for prediction. Theories in the fourth sense is the form closest to the topic of research: it is generated in a particular study and is the direct outflow of research. Theory in the third and fourth sense is almost always based on empirical data.

Sutton and Staw (1995) note that the many ideas about what theory is risk making the concept meaningless. Being critical to extended claims that, for example, working hypotheses or unordered speculations are theory, they instead ask what theory is *not*. Among what they identify as not being theory – albeit often claimed by authors as such (“theoretical framework”) – are simple references to earlier work on the topic. They argue that *if* previous work is to support theorisation, a stream of logic that the referred texts together form must be demonstrated.

2.2 *Functions of Theory*

A range of functions of theory are elaborated in the literature. A first important role is to show predispositions of the researcher. When accounting for theoretical framework, researchers signpost epistemological and other inclinations, which are clues to understanding goals and research questions (Collins and Stockton, 2018). Several commentators emphasise that all research is based on theory about the study object (Collins and Stockton, 2018; Sikes, 2006; Wright, 2008). Identification of a research problem and how it is framed therefore always draws on a conceptual structure that builds a logic – a theory (Rule and John, 2015).

Theories also support methodological choices: they are at the heart of all planning and undertaking of research, providing the rationale behind methodological design (Collins and Stockton, 2018; Bradbury-Jones *et al.*, 2014). Methods for data collection and analysis rely on theory. In analysis, theories can be used as lenses that afford different ways of interpreting data (Rule and John 2015). Theory accordingly has a practical role providing conceptual framing, and often a toolbox and means of analysis (Ball 2006; Collins and Stockton, 2018).

When theories are seen as the outcome of research, their function is to be the means for coming as close as possible to the “truth”. Research that tests hypotheses or earlier theories against the empirical/social world can expand or detail earlier knowledge, thereby generating a new or more valid theory. Generated theory sometimes takes the form of a model or a conceptual framework, which can readily be picked up by other scholars to be used in their own research (Moore 2012/1974). Other times new theory is an instrument for reasoned explanation and prediction.

The power of theories to interrupt hegemonically maintained understandings is emphasised by several scholars. Theories have an emancipatory function (Collins and Stockton, 2018; Sikes, 2006) providing important supports to disturb conventional thinking, avoid closure and open for paradox. Ball (2006) argues for the value of theories to free thinking from conservative boundaries, since this can destabilise and re-invent the social. However, a few authors take a more critical stance towards how theories can affect thinking. Collins and Stockton (2018), and Sutton and Staw (1995) all warn about overreliance on theory, as the choice to centre a certain theory may prevent data from coming through and thereby bring the risk of confirmation bias. Collins and Stockton also reiterate the high value in readiness to *negate* theories one uses, since disproving ideas is also a powerful act of knowledge production. Thomas (1997) goes further in his critique of using theory in research, and even believes that theories are harmful as they tend to conserve thinking and stabilise the status quo. He maintains that ideas of theories representing ‘the cream of disciplines’ will hinder pluralistic deliberation.

These diverse understandings of theory and its functions partly explain ongoing debates in the children’s rights field: consensus thinking and under theorisation (Cordero Arce, 2015; Quennerstedt, 2011, 2013; Reynaert *et al.*, 2009) *versus* abundant implicit and explicit theorisation (Hanson and Peleg, 2020). Clarifying differing understandings of what theory/ies or theorisation are in educational children’s rights research, and how it is used, might offer further grounds for discussion.

Drawing on the main understandings of theory presented above, including awareness about the space that policy and law occupies in the field, we constructed a tool for analysis of *what is positioned as theory* in the publications, its *functions*, and potential contribution to furthering theorisation in the field (see below and Table 1).

3 Methodology

3.1 *Search and Inclusion of Publications*

To attain elaborated insights in what is positioned as theory in educational children's rights research, and what its functions are, publications were analysed with a strict focus on their ways of theorising. The following inclusion criteria were decided:

1. published 2012–2021;
2. peer reviewed;
3. self-labelling as children's rights research by explicitly mentioning children's rights or the CRC;
4. clearly focussing on circumstances or activities in children's educational practice or its conditions.

Drawing the line between *children's rights* and *human rights research* is complex. Within the field, there is some tension between children's rights being discussed as part of the human rights or considered as a separate field. For this study, separation was maintained, only including work explicitly connected to either children's rights or the CRC. Finally, to maintain focus on *educational* children's rights research, focusing on rights issues in education centred on teaching-learning-pedagogy was deemed too narrow. Children's rights issues in education include a wide range of interdisciplinary matters, often described as rights *to*, *in* and *through* education (Verhellen, 1993). Therefore, circumstances or activities in focus had to be clearly directed to educational practice or its direct conditions.

The first two inclusion criteria were controlled for in the systematic publication search. The literature search for a previous review article (Quennerstedt and Moody, 2020) was reused and updated. One search engine was used (EBSCO) to search two databases, Academic Search Elite/Premiere which is a multi-disciplinary database with a wide coverage (1792 peer reviewed journals) and ERIC, which is a database specialised on educational resources. The search terms were: *children's rights*, *human rights*, *the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, *CRC*, *UNCRC* in various combinations with *education*, *school*, *teacher*, *student*, *early childhood education*, *ECE*. An initial screening identified

134 potential publications during the period. During the analytical reading, the researchers checked the two last inclusion criteria (#3 and #4), which could not be determined before full text review. This resulted in the exclusion of 24 publications. The final number of publications to undergo full analysis was 110.

Certain limitations of the search need to be acknowledged. The first concerns terms used to identify publications. Though well-established terms in the field of children’s rights and education were used, several relevant publications may not have been captured, if they did not use any of these words in title, keywords or abstract. The second is that only English language publications were analysed. Since authors from English speaking or publishing countries dominate the data, the issues, research approaches and theory use common in these countries may also dominate the findings.

3.2 *Process for Analysing Included Publications*

The tool for analysis that was constructed consisted of a five-question analysis chart, based on the understandings of theory presented above and compared with empirical data. The questions directed the identification and coding of different forms of theorisation, functions of theorising, and the assessment of contribution to furthering theorising in the field. Table 1 shows and explains the analysis questions and coding alternatives. Three questions involved choosing among fixed coding alternatives, and two required descriptive text. Questions 1 and 2 could be coded with more than one alternative.

TABLE 1 Analysis chart

Analysis questions and codes	Explanation of codes
1. What is positioned as theory?	That which is positioned as theory is:
Four forms of theory:	– <i>Established theoretical approach</i> : an approach or tool that is known and used in one or more disciplines or research fields, often has a name/label
a. An established theoretical approach	– <i>General theory</i> : a theory that is known, often of “big T” theory type, often named and used across disciplines
- General theory	
- Conceptual Framework	
b. Literature	– <i>Conceptual framework</i> : a known set of concepts or a model, intra- or cross-disciplinary used, often of “little t” theory type
- That anchors the research in the field	

TABLE 1 Analysis chart (*cont.*)

Analysis questions and codes	Explanation of codes
<div>- That connects the research to the field</div> <div>c. Policy or law</div> <div>d. Theory that is generated</div>	<div>- <i>Literature</i>: scholarly, published texts. The literature either <i>anchors</i> (works to rigorously anchor the own research in a field, an approach, etc.) or <i>connects</i> (works to connect the own research to a field or approach).</div> <div>- <i>Policy</i>: international or national policy texts</div> <div>- <i>Law</i>: international or national legal treaty texts, case-law, and legal doctrine</div> <div>- <i>Generated</i>: the outcome of the research</div>
<div>2. What is the function of theory?</div> <div>a. Informs the construction of the research topic</div> <div>b. Challenges conservative thinking or emancipates thought</div> <div>c. Assists in data coding and analysis</div> <div>d. Expands or details knowledge</div> <div>e. Grounds methodology</div> <div>f. Unclear function</div>	<div>That which is positioned as theory has the function to:</div> <div>- <i>Inform construction</i>: by stating central assumptions about the phenomenon, identify and motivate the research problem, claim, and lay out central framing, etc.</div> <div>- <i>Challenge</i>: by disturbing conventional thinking, opening for paradox, etc.</div> <div>- <i>Assist in analysis</i>: by providing tools for interpreting data, organise findings, etc.</div> <div>- <i>Expand/detail</i>: by presenting new or more valid knowledge; adding new dimensions or aspects or specifying earlier less precise knowledge</div> <div>- <i>Ground methodology</i>: by motivating and/or explaining the rationale for the chosen research methods</div>

TABLE 1 Analysis chart (cont.)

Analysis questions and codes	Explanation of codes
3. What general theories or conceptual frameworks are visible? What is the literature about?	(no fixed alternatives – descriptive text)
4. To what extent does the publication contribute to furthering theorisation in educational children's rights research? a. Restricted b. Some c. Substantial	The publication's contribution to theorisation is judged to be: – <i>Restricted</i> : the publication lacks theorisation, or it is minimal, or does not provide any new or developed thinking – <i>Some</i> : the theorisation in the publication adds or expands on established viewpoints in a way that contributes in a recognisable way – <i>Substantial</i> : the publication suggests/ applies new thinking or approaches, or uses previous established approaches in an innovative way, or introduces previously unaddressed issues or lines of reasoning
5. If substantial contribution, in what sense?	(no fixed alternatives – descriptive text)

To calibrate the coding, two rounds of analyses were undertaken. In the first, six publications were analysed by all three researchers. In the second, 15 publications were each analysed by two researchers. As differences in coding were identified and discussed, a joint understanding of each coding option was determined.

Assessment of the degree to which analysed publications were seen to contribute to furthering theorisation in the field (Question 4) needed thorough reflection to assure that assessments were made from the same criteria. First, the analysed publication's current contribution was judged, rather than its potential contribution at the time of its publication. Second, and importantly, the quality of the research, text or general contribution was *not* assessed, only the theorisation's potential to initiate widened, deepened or new thinking

within educational children's rights research. Given that the focus in this paper is on what is positioned as theory and the functions of theory, the contribution assessment has a complementary role to the main exploration. Therefore, publications assessed as giving either some or a substantial contribution to furthering theorising were grouped together, forming a qualitatively different group of publications than the ones assessed as contributing to theorisation in a restricted way. The findings of the analysis of theory positionings and function of theory were reflected against these two groups (*restricted* and *some/substantial*) of potential contribution to furthering theorisation in educational children's rights research.

After the calibration process, each publication was read in full and coded separately by two researchers. Analytic challenges were contemplated and resolved collectively. Consensus was reached through discussion when coding diverged. Most coding divergences concerned the first two forms of theorising. *Established theoretical approach* encompasses two subforms; general theory and conceptual framework (Table 1). Distinguishing between these was not always straightforward, with several discussions needed to establish a common view. The theorisation form *Literature* was initially too broad, as the vast spectrum between extensive and logic-building literature reviews, and restricted reviews of a connecting character, was identified as a qualitative difference in theorising with literature. Literature was therefore divided into two subforms; *literature to anchor* the research in a logic built through literature, and *to connect* the research to a certain research area or field. When all publications had been double-coded and checked, a final round of coding was conducted to ensure coding consistency, in which one researcher checked all publications coded *Established theoretical approach*, and another researcher checked all publications coded *Literature*. All calibrations and analyses were documented.

The final analytical step was to summarise the frequency of the respective theorising forms, functions and content of descriptive text. Thereafter, various cross-comparisons were undertaken to distinguish patterns and tendencies.

3.3 *National Dominance in Analysed Publications*

Before accounting for the findings, an overview of authors' national origins is provided, raising some questions about how national affiliation might have a bearing on the field's theorisation. Three nations stand out as contributing most publications to the field – Australia (17), England (18) and Sweden (15). Authors from these countries, and their traditions and preferences, can consequently be expected to leave deeper marks in the field's theorising than authors from nations publishing less. A concentration of child rights and education scholarship is found in Sweden and Israel, with more individual authors

publishing multiple articles than in other nations. In Australia and England, the authorship spread is broad: more publications but by many authors. It seems there is a relatively broad international engagement with educational children’s rights research, however relatively few scholars are consistently publishing in the field.

Only eight of the analysed publications had more than one country represented in the authorship team. For half of these articles, co-authorship comprised scholars from the same region (e.g. UK; Australia/New Zealand; Americas). This suggests that educational children’s rights research may be quite geographically siloed in terms of authorship and collaboration. Traditions, habits, and agendas may be similar within nations/regions. One example that indicates such regional habits is that all papers by Swedish authors use general theories (often North European Didaktik theory or curriculum theory). Geographical theory traditions may accordingly affect theorising and the potential for theory development.

4 Findings

Analysis results are presented in two sections, corresponding to the research questions:

- *what* is positioned as theory in educational children’s rights research, and are there any identifiable *trends* in theorisation?
- what is the *function* of that which is positioned as theory?

4.1 Theory Positioning

The four examined forms of theorising and their occurrence in the 110 analysed publications are:

1) Established theoretical approach (general theory/conceptual framework)	54
2) Literature (anchors/connects)	105
3) Policy/law	42
4) Theory that is generated	12

It is less common to position only one (26 publications) or combine three (20 publications) theorising forms as theory. Instead, combining two forms of

TABLE 2 Frequency of combinations when two forms are positioned as the publication's theoretical framing.

Form of theorising	General theory	Conceptual framework	Literature to anchor	Literature to connect	Policy and/ or law	Generated through the research
General theory		0	13	8	0	0
Conceptual framework	0		10	2	0	0
Literature to anchor	13	10			14	4
Literature to connect	8	2			12	1
Policy and/ or law	0	0	14	12		0
Theory generated	0	0	4	1	0	

theorising to ground the work is most common (64 publications). Table 2 gives an overview of the frequency of combinations when two forms of theory are positioned as the study’s theoretical framing.

4.2 *Established Theoretical Approach as Theory*

Of the analysed publications, 54 position an established theoretical approach as theory, either in the form of a general theory or a conceptual framework further described below.

4.2.1 General Theory

Just over a quarter of the publications position a general theory as theory in their work (29/110 publications). Table 3 provides an overview of disciplinary sources and theory examples. Approximately one third of these publications connect their study to *philosophical theorising*; either moral philosophising on right and wrong, deliberations on justice and its justifications, or political philosophising on how social order and power issues affect the arrangement of collective life. A width of theories is referred to, and the use of philosophical theory is spread within the field (i.e., used by many authors from a range of

TABLE 3 Disciplinary sources for general theories, and examples of theories used in publications

Discipline	Examples of theories
Philosophy	<i>Moral philosophy</i> – theory of justice, Human Rights theory, capability approach <i>Political philosophy</i> – Butler’s gender performativity, Foucauldian discourse theory
Sociology	Childhood sociology
Education	North European Didaktik-theory, curriculum theory
Interdisciplinary	Crip theory, ANT, salutogenic

contexts). *Sociological theories* are to used attach children’s rights to social patterns, relationships and institutions. One theory, Childhood sociology, stands out as being of particular interest to the study of children’s rights and was identified in approximately one fifth of the publications using general theory. *Educational theories* referred to place children’s rights issues within the curriculum and pedagogy area. Educational theory has a more limited spread, only used by a few authors.

When a general theory is positioned as theory, it is always combined with literature, but almost never with policy or law (1/29) or theory generation (2/29). Positioning general theory as theory consequently seems to correlate with links to literature.

Use of general theories clearly augments the contribution to furthering theorisation within the field; only two publications were assessed as providing a restricted contribution. Given the relatively small number of analysed publications using general theories, it is possible that such use stands out simply because it is uncommon to see general theories in educational children’s rights research.

4.2.2 Conceptual Framework

About a fifth of the publications positioned a recognised conceptual framework as a theoretical foundation (25/110), including models or a shared nomenclature. Table 4 shows the conceptual frameworks most frequently referred to.

All publications positioning a conceptual framework as theory combine this with literature. Over half of the publications that display the combination of a conceptual framework and literature as theory also add a third

TABLE 4 Thematic basis of conceptual frameworks featuring more than once in the corpus

Common Themes	Examples of frameworks
Participation	Lundy’s Participation Model; Hart’s Ladder of Participation; Shier’s Pathways to Participation; Participation dimensions
Rights	Human Rights Education; Tomasevski’s 4As; the 3Ps understanding of Children’s Rights; rights consciousness
Sociology	Equality of opportunity; meritocracy

form of theorisation: general theory, policy/law or theory generation (13/25 publications).

Using a conceptual framework also seems to raise the contribution to furthering theorisation, although not quite as much as a general theory. Only 5 out of 25 publications positioning a conceptual framework as theory were assessed as providing a restricted contribution.

4.2.3 Literature as Theory

Literature is positioned as theory in almost all publications; only 5 of the 110 analysed texts engage so little in previous literature that it was not seen to frame the research. With literature, authors identify and elaborate central lines of inquiry and areas of study, and account for the current state of the topic. In this way, literature is significant to constructing the logic that scaffolds the research. It is clear from the analysis that embedding the research in previous literature is the most employed form of theorising in educational children’s rights research.

As presented earlier, use of literature that *anchors* the research in the field was distinguished from use that *connects* it to the field. An anchoring literature review was more common (61/105 publications) than a connecting one (44/105). Of the 61 publications that *anchor* with literature, 11 present this as the sole theoretical foundation of the research. In 9 of the 44 publications that *connect* with literature, this is the only thing positioned as theory. For both anchoring and connecting literature, almost half of the publications combine literature with an established theoretical approach (48/105), and almost a third with policy or law (33/105). The general pattern when positioning literature as a theoretical base for the research is accordingly either to ground the study’s logic in a combination of literature and an established theoretical approach, or literature and policy/law. These two options are mainstream “theory package”

options in educational children's rights research. Few publications deviate from these alternatives.

Assessing contributions to furthering the field's theorising shows a clear difference between the two types of literature use. Anchoring with rigour in literature promotes the work's value to push theorising forward and is rarely assessed as offering restricted contributions to theory (only 7/61 publications), while half the publications connecting with literature (22/44) were assessed as making restricted theory contributions.

A combination of literature and an established theoretical approach is more likely to augment the theoretical contribution to the field than only using literature or combining with policy or law. Adding an established theory is accordingly particularly theory-strengthening in work that engages in the literature in a more restricted way.

4.2.4 Studied Topics

Topics addressed in the publications through theorising with literature were also examined. The topic logics thereby constructed are more developed when the literature anchors the research than when it connects it. Topics were categorised as either *rights topics* or *other topics*. Many publications anchor their research in or connect it to more than one topic. Literature on a children's rights topic (e.g. participation), is often combined with a topic classified as other (e.g. school transitions). Figure 1 shows topics anchored in or connected to, and how often they occur.

When examining overall patterns presented in the figure, opposite tendencies can be noticed in the left and right halves of the circle. The left half, displaying rights topics raised in the publications, distillates toward the centre. Few publications anchor or connect with topics in the outer circle, while many publications in the inner gather around a few topics. This shows the presence of a joint understanding among educational children's rights researchers about certain main issues or topic clusters in the field. The right half of the circle, displaying other aspects that are parts of building a logic, has few topics and publications in the centre but more when moving outwards. For other topics, the very wide range of issues perceived to be connectable to children's rights is visible.

Regarding children's rights topics (left side), the most frequent topics found in this study echo earlier examinations of the children's rights research field (Quennerstedt and Moody, 2020; Reynaert *et al.*, 2009). The *participation* theme remains the most recurrent, and the participation aspect *voice* is also frequent. *Rights education* (often Human Rights Education – HRE) is another repeated topic when framing the research with literature. Literature about

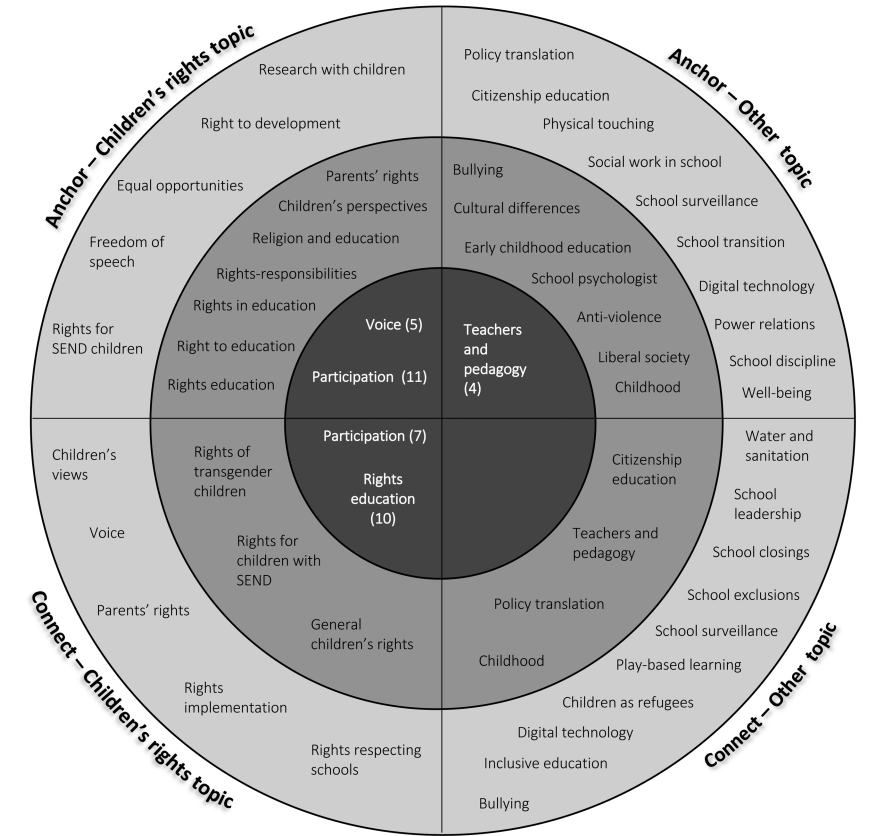


FIGURE 1 Topics that the research is anchored in or connected to through literature. Inner circle shows topics anchored in/connected to in more than 3 publications (number in brackets), middle circle 2-3 publications, and outer circle 1 publication

rights education does not seem to easily allow anchoring; most stay at connecting it. An explanation might be that rights education is a fairly new topic in the research field, therefore literature is still limited in size and elaboration.

4.2.5 Policy and Law as Theory

Policy and/or law is positioned as theory in 42 of the 110 publications. The CRC and connected documents are the documents mostly referred to. Other documents, such as those relating to HRE or legal cases, are also common in the construction of a logic. A significant share of publications coded as positioning policy/law as theory directly connect to children’s rights as defined in policy or law (34/42).

Most papers referring to policy or law combine this framework with another form of theorising (37/42). Half of these have a connecting literature review (19/42). It appears that policy or law may be considered as sufficient theorising, as five publications lack any other form of theory. In these, international treaties, such as the CRC, seem to be positioned as a satisfactory theoretical basis for the work.

Building research on policy or law clearly reduces the contribution the work gives to further theorisation. Over half of the publications positioning policy and/or law as theory were assessed as making a restricted contribution to furthering theorisation within the field (24/42). All five instances when policy/law was the only form of theorisation were assessed as making a restricted contribution – policy/law by itself makes a restricted contribution unless paired with another form of theorisation.

4.2.6 Theory Generation as Theory

Only a small number of publications (12) were found to *generate theory* by detailing earlier findings or developing a model or a conceptual framework. Almost all publications (11/12) classified as theory-generating seek to develop or suggest a conceptual framework for understanding and researching a children's rights topic. Four of these contribute a model or a conceptual framework intended to aid in the understanding or study of participation issues – an area of high research interest in the field. Other topics for which models or conceptualisations are developed include child-rights based approaches, children's HRE curriculum, conceptualising the relation between rights and responsibilities, and conceptual tools for identifying discrimination. Several papers further elaborated or qualified earlier conceptualisations or models.

Publications that generate theory by developing a model or conceptual framework also combine this theorising with other forms of theory examined in this analysis; general theory, previous models (own or others'), literature, and policy. All publications that develop a model or conceptual framework are assessed as making some or a substantial contribution to furthering theorisation. The generation of theories is a contribution that adds to theoretical possibilities in the field.

4.3 Trends in the Positioning of Theory

To end the account of what is positioned as theory, some overarching discoveries concerning changes over time, how national origin of the research is connected to theory positioning, and how some high-producing individual authorships affect educational children's rights theorisation are presented.

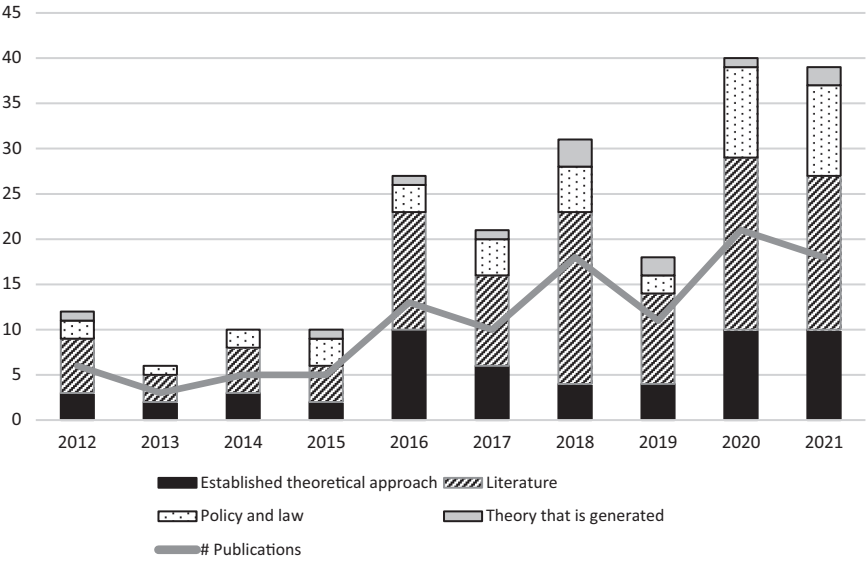


FIGURE 2 Evolution of forms of theorising over the decade analysed

4.3.1 Theory Positioning Over Time

Examining trends in what has been positioned as theory over time showed both a certain stability in theory positioning and some changes. Figure 2 demonstrates the increase in publication numbers and prevalence of the different forms of theory each year. Figure 3 shows how the forms of theory are proportionately divided over the publication per year.

Literature and policy/law have consistently been the main forms of theorisation employed over time (Figure 3). From around 2016 onwards, all identified forms of theory are represented in the body of publications. While there has been an increase in number of publications from 2016, proportionately, some uses of particular forms of theorisation have decreased (e.g. conceptual framework; literature to anchor), while others have been more consistently used (e.g. general theory). Overall, when considered proportionately, a more balanced use of the various forms of theorising is noted from 2016 onwards.

4.3.2 Theory Positioning and Authorship

Given that 58 per cent of the analysed publications over the 10-year period come from 5 countries: England (18 publications), Australia (17 publications), Sweden (15 publications), Israel (8 publications), and Scotland (7 publications), jurisdictional trends in theorisation from these countries were also analysed, indicating the following specifics:

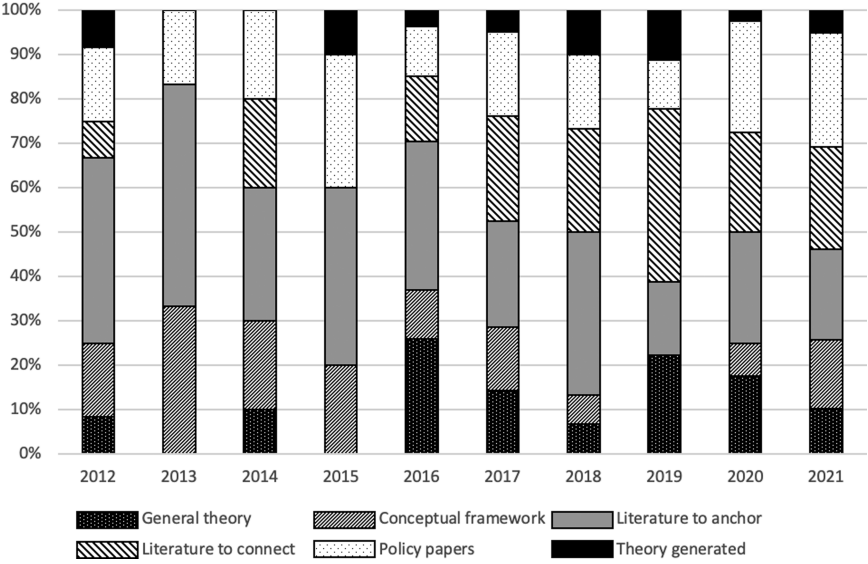


FIGURE 3 Percentage coverage of theorisation forms per year

- All publications authored/coauthored by Swedish researchers present a general theory in their work (often North European Didaktik theory or curriculum theory).
- The only conceptual framework used by Swedish researchers is HRE.
- When authors from England use a general theory, their literature review tends to be of connecting character.
- Rights education and/or pedagogy feature in more than half of the publications from England.
- Half of the publications from Israel use a conceptual framework (mainly “rights consciousness”).
- Participation or voice as a topic is evident in more than half the publications from Australia but absent in Swedish papers.
- The use of policy/law in combination with literature as the only form theorisation is more apparent in papers from England, Scotland and Australia. Conversely, only one Swedish paper uses policy/law.
- Over the studied period there was almost no theory generated by authors affiliated with England, Scotland or Sweden.

The tendencies noted above suggest that the national affiliation of a researcher may affect their way of theorising, and that certain “main” national approaches to theorising affect the theoretical choices of researchers.

TABLE 5 Number of publications per author during analysed time period

110 total publications involving 179 authors	
1 publication	164 authors
2 publications	8 authors
3 publications	3 authors
4 publications	2 authors
5+ publications	2 authors

Individual researchers contributing the most publications from these countries can also be assumed to affect the theorisation. This possibility was investigated further by looking at the national affiliation listed for each author in each analysed paper. Across all analysed articles, most authors published only once in the field during the analysed period (see Table 5). The dominance of the three nations producing the most papers in the analysed period is also reflected in this data about authorship trends. Australia has the highest number of authors represented with 38 individual authors, followed by England with 29 individual authors, and Sweden with 11 individual authors.

Only 15 authors have two or more publications, which drops to 7 authors with three or more publications during the period. Publication trends reflect a wide rather than concentrated authorship in the field. Only two authors have more than four publications in the dataset, suggesting the work of these authors may be more firmly situated within the field of child rights and education research than authors with fewer publications in the field over the analysed period. Most publications from these two authors either draw on a general theory, a conceptual framework or generate theory. No publications by these authors were assessed as making a restricted contribution to furthering the field’s theorisation.

In summary, researcher national affiliation does appear to influence theorisation in the field. Countries with researchers generating a high number of publications will influence theorisation more than countries with low publication numbers. The above analyses also note that individual researchers in the field that produce a high number of publications will also affect theorisation, as these high publishing authors appear to drive certain ways of theorising, or certain theoretical models. What this analysis also shows is that the furthering of theorisation in the field due to sustained engagement with educational rights research topics, appear to be progressed by very few researchers (n=15)

relative to the number of researchers who connect their work with the field, but perhaps do not situate their work within it.

4.4 Functions of Theory in the Analysed Publications

Having shown what is positioned as theory in educational children’s rights research over the decade 2012–2021, and trends in authorship and country affiliation in the positioning of theory, this section focuses on the *functions* of theory.

The five functions examined were to:

- 1) support construction of the study object or line of inquiry;
- 2) challenge conservative thinking or emancipate thought;
- 3) assist in data coding and analysis;
- 4) expand or detail available knowledge; or
- 5) ground methodology.

In line with the basic assumption that there is no theory-free research (Collins and Stockton, 2018), all research was presumed to have a study object or a line of argument, which is always constructed by drawing on something.

In about a third of the publications (42/110), construction of the study object is *the only* identifiable function of theory. About two thirds of the publications (68/110) use theory with an additional function:

– Assist in data coding and analysis	33
– Expand or detail knowledge	26
– Challenge conservative thinking/emancipate thought	14
– Ground methodology	7

4.4.1 Function: Construct the Study Object or Line of Inquiry

In most publications where the sole identified function of theory is to construct the object or inquiry line, a literature review of connecting character or policy/law is positioned as theory. An established theoretical approach is used in less than a quarter of these publications. Of note, 31/42 were assessed as giving a restricted contribution to furthering educational children’s rights theorisation.

Studies that only use previous literature and/or policy with the single purpose to ground their question, study object, or line of argument, seem rarely to contribute input for continued theorisation. This does not mean that the studies are of low quality or do not contribute to the field in other ways.

4.4.2 Function: Assist in Data Coding and Analysis

In a third of the publications (33/110), theory functions as a concrete tool or conceptual support in data coding and analysis. Almost all of these (30/33)

position an established theoretical approach as theory, and all review the literature (half anchoring, half connecting). Only a few (5/33) position policy/law as theory. Only one of these publications was classified as a restricted contribution paper. There is a strong indication that using a general theory or conceptual framework in concrete analysis will make the work more suitable for theory development.

4.4.3 Function: Expand or Detail Current Knowledge

Most of the publications that expand or detail knowledge (20/26) position an anchoring literature review as theory, and about half use an established theoretical approach. This group contains all publications positioning their own findings as theory (12/26). When theory has the function to expand or detail, the value for furthering theorising rises (only one publication assessed as restricted contribution).

4.4.4 Trends in the Functions of Theory

The most common function of theory in educational children’s rights research, besides constructing the study object, is to provide concrete support for analysis. There is relatively limited use of theory with the function to challenge or emancipate thinking, or to anchor methodology theoretically. Examination of whether the function of theory has changed during the studied period showed only minor changes (Table 6).

When theory has a wider function than study object construction, the value of the work to continued theory development increases considerably. Of the 54 publications in this group, only 6 were assessed as giving a restricted contribution to furthering the field’s theorisation.

TABLE 6 Functions of theory during first and second half of the studied period

Function	2012–2016 N=32 publications	2017–2021 N=78 publications
Challenges/emancipates	5 (13%)	9 (12%)
Data coding/analysis	12 (32%)	21 (26%)
Expands/details	7 (19%)	19 (24%)
Grounds methodology	0	7 (9%)

5 Discussion

The paradox suggesting a field can be both abundant and deficient of theory is interesting when considering the findings of this analysis. To contribute to scholarly discourse in relation to the question of theorisation in educational child rights research, this paper aimed to provide an elaborated picture of *what is considered to be* theory in the field, *trends* in theory use, and identifying the *function* theory has in research within the field. Salient insights are now discussed, notably considering risks and opportunities for evolution of the field.

5.1 *Theory Uses in Educational Children's Rights and Related Risks*

Few educational children's rights researchers articulate specific theoretical alignment with named theories or established theoretical approaches. Instead, previous research literature is the main form of theorising, often in combination with either policy or law, or with an established theory. It can be assumed that inbuilt assumptions and implicit intra-field theoretical agreement may cause relatively low requirements to articulate a theoretical positioning. For example, it is likely that a child-rights researcher holds a supportive view on children and their capabilities, but few studies pronounce this position and present a wider theoretical base for it – this stance is instead implicitly present in the work. Those familiar to the field may recognise such implicit theorising, while those outside the field or who expect explicit theorisation may instead consider it to reflect a lack of theoretical depth and rigour. The aforementioned paradox may consequently be connected to whether researchers view and accept implicit theory as theory or whether they expect articulation of theoretical positions.

Whether an implicit theoretical stance is acceptable, or if some level of intentional articulation should be included, is central to a continued discussion about theorisation within the field. In line with Sutton and Staw's (1995) claim that simple references to earlier work is insufficient in itself to constitute theorisation – as a *logic* must be built through the connections made – the findings suggest, however, a need for some level of *intentionality in explicating* the theorisation. If theorisation is to be furthered and deepened, scholars in the field need to be more explicit with their theoretical anchoring. Theorisation should be an identifiable system with which to analyse, interpret and organise the knowledge produced. By being identifiable it becomes reusable.

The cross-disciplinary character of children's rights research may also explain the image of theory use evidenced in this study. While theory use in *educational* children's rights research was examined, very few publications used educational theory, which confirms Quennerstedt and Moody's (2020)

similar findings. Instead, general theories are mostly borrowed from other disciplines, primarily philosophy and sociology. The merging of disciplinary traditions makes clarifying and explaining different theoretical standpoints separately more challenging, and might generate a risk of eclecticism. Encouraging researchers to clarify their disciplinary standpoints and justify their choices could support more clarity in theory anchoring, and perhaps more systematic use of it.

However, the combination of general theories from various disciplines with extensive engagement with children's rights literature is maybe the cradle for *educational children's rights theory*. The cross-disciplinary application of general theories therefore seems to be relevant to educational children's rights work, through its anchoring in existing *child rights research* to build its logic. The question of how appropriate the adaptation to the field is, and what can come out of it, remains open.

Based on the range of topics scholars engage with and theorise on with literature, the picture of the field's theorisation seems somewhat fragmented. Aside from participation and voice, no other topic theorisations are systematically progressed. A saturated engagement with other topics is lacking, which might also explain a weaker theorisation of these topics at this stage. In-depth study of topics that are currently superficially addressed would contribute to renewal and criticality, and even invigorate controversies in the field.

Spread of authorship within the field is another aspect to consider in relation to theorisation. Over 91 per cent of authors in the examined data are one-time authors. Certainly, seminal work can be a "one off" paper. Nonetheless, it seems that theory is more often advanced by researchers who demonstrate a lasting field commitment. To push theorisation, one would either need to drive it oneself (e.g. through evolving an idea in multiple papers over time), or have it picked up by others and driven by them (e.g. using/adapting it in different contexts). The analysis has only identified a few researchers who may be driving theorisation in the field through consistent engagement. Are attempts to develop and push theorisation (evident in the work of the few that publish consistently in the field) diluted by the sheer number of researchers who connect peripherally? Also, if only a few researchers can afford to invest consistently enough to drive the field's theorisation, should this be considered as a risk for its sustainability?

Along similar lines, the searches conducted for this paper pick up publications that have been explicitly positioned at the intersection of education and children's rights research. This positioning is largely done through the choice of title, keywords and what is put in the abstract, which are the "marketing

spaces” for a publication, and central bases for digital searching. If scholars that research children’s rights issues in educational contexts do not position their published work as educational rights research, it may not be found and taken forward by those within the field. An important question to consider further is why researchers whose work has clear alignment with educational children’s rights research might not position it in this way

Could it be that there is disciplinary, institutional or political dis/incentivisation in some (national) contexts to align ones work (or not) with the field of child rights research? For example, an educational rights researcher might consider that success with funding applications is more likely if they position their work and track record alongside a parallel or related field. Further, diluting how they position their work as being less about rights and more about education generally can be seen as a way to meet institutional or external publishing requirements. Particularly for some of the more controversial or politically un/acceptable topics, some researchers may even be discouraged from explicitly situating their work in this way. It might also be that researchers from other disciplinary traditions than education are required to conform to disciplinary expectations when it comes to how an author positions and uses theory. We do not have any answers to these matters but believe that is important to discuss them further in the field and consider the bearing that these and other factors may have on the tendencies noted.

5.2 *Opportunities for Extending Theorisation in the Field*

Some theory uses seem to be more powerful than others. Bradbury-Jones and colleagues (2014) argue in favour of an articulate role of theory that moves research beyond pure description of data, and allows interpretation of the underpinning social processes and potential “explanation” of findings. This is reflected in this study: general theory tends to have more powerful functions than other forms of theory. When literature and/or policy are positioned as theory, they mainly inform the construction of the study object, while functions to challenge/question/push forward thinking are rare. It is the way authors use established theoretical approaches – the function they give to it – that helps to sustain or extend theorisation. Educational children’s rights researchers need to continue using existing theoretical approaches as well as finding/creating new ways of developing them.

The CRC is seminal for international children’s rights law and, as shown in this analysis, the latter as well as other policy/law documents are often positioned as the theoretical basis to contextualise and situate the object of study. However, it is not defensible from a theoretical standpoint that a highly negotiated and political treaty should be the only ground used to build the logic

in scientific work. Moreover, the Convention appears to do little to further *theorisation* in itself (unveil new topics, challenge orthodoxies, detail knowledge etc.), unless paired with more powerful theoretical foundations, such as a general theory or a conceptual framework. Indeed, it remains difficult to go beyond and challenge conventional thinking when policy, law or literatures alone are used to define the object of study. This analysis suggests that to emancipate thought or further theorisation in the field, an established theoretical framework is also needed. If the field is interested in challenging and problematising existing thinking into more critical positions, authors need to use more intentional theorising (general theory, conceptual frameworks/models) to push the field forward.

Finally, given the lack of cross-national collaborations in the field, another opportunity could be to encourage researchers to engage in co-authoring beyond their national and cultural realities. As shown above, different ways of approaching objects and theorising can be found depending on the national affiliation of authors. Enabling more disciplinary clarity while engaging in interdisciplinary work, more exchanges around scholarly work in the field can become an undeniable strength.

6 Conclusion

The examinations of theorisation in educational children's rights research conducted in this paper show that what is positioned as theory and what authors do with it matters. A key contribution of this paper is in highlighting the differences in what researchers *recognise* as theory. In relation to the debate about over/under/sufficient theorisation, results in cautiously questioning if an agreement on *what* theory in educational children's rights research is, is possible, and whether it is even necessary. The findings that some uses of theory appear to be more powerful than others is another important contribution to take forward. To do more than simply constructing the study object the theorisation must build a solid logic. Brief literature connection alone, or framing just with policy or law, is insufficient to provide an organisational logic within a field. Instead, disciplinary organisational logic generally requires borrowing theories, adapting their uses, or anchoring in literature with rigour.

If more theory could support the evolution of the field, is *an* educational children's rights theory needed to give identity to and drive depth in the field? Do interdisciplinarity possibilities and varying ways of using theory in educational rights research need to be balanced with some kind of disciplinary distinctiveness? This is a difficult question. A unifying theory always comprises

the risk of a paradigmatic alignment, implying a disciplinary approach to an inherently interdisciplinary topic. Embracing interdisciplinarity allows the field to hover above a single discipline and invites creativity in an in-between space that does not belong to any one particular discipline. However, a field of research that hovers without any communal theoretical roots will have difficulties communicating central aspects and standpoints taken, and risk remaining as fragmented as demonstrated in this study. That there are few cultural traditions, and few researchers engaging consistently in the field, also presents a risk for the sustainability and future of the field that should be investigated further in future research.

Arguably, although disciplinary alignment of the field does not seem to be the way to support its sustainable theorisation, there is a need for some internal theoretical coherence. Doing so offers those seeking to connect with the field something more than cursory links to the Convention as the way to engage in educational children's rights research. Remaining open to what theory is and thinking about the role and purpose of theory invites further possibilities for the field to be a place to produce new ideas and new knowledge. This offers a way forward to establish at least some form of theoretical interdisciplinary identity.

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