

Children as Decision Makers in Education: Sharing Experiences Across Cultures.

S. Cox, A. Robinson-Pant, C. Dyer and M. Schweisfurth (eds). Continuum, London and New York, 2010. 180 pp, \$140.00, ISBN 97-8-0826-42548-5.

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A haunting image from this useful book is of the Indian village children, who hung hurricane lamps in the streets to light their way home after night classes until they persuaded the authorities to install street lighting. Based on a seminar series, the book has 17 short chapters from a range of countries and settings, with connecting editorial links. It frequently cites the United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as the catalyst for children's burgeoning rights to be decision makers and to participate beyond tokenism. But this is misleading.

The UNCRC refers to participation only in relation to disabled children (Article 23) and to cultural life and the arts (Article 31), but not to any other aspect of children's lives. Participation is a useful shorthand for the rights that go beyond primarily either *protecting* children or *providing* services and amenities for them. Like adults' first generation civil rights, UNCRC participation rights include freedoms of information and expression, association and peaceful assembly, thought, conscience and religion, rights to privacy, a nationality, a legal identity, asylum if necessary, due process of law, reasonable working conditions, and to respect for the honour and reputation, and the culture, dignity and worth of every child (UNCRC Articles 5, 7, 8, 12-17, 22, 30-32, 37, 40).

Although some chapters in the book provide valuable reports on some of these rights, and all the chapters address provision rights to education, they tend to be seen as benefits, goods, advantages, goals, or aspirations rather than rights. The effect is rather like a book that describes parts of the elephant in great detail, but never explains that it is about the elephant, a living organic unity with meaning and power. If the many matters in the book had been explicitly linked to their relevant UNCRC Articles, the book would be more persuasive and powerful, because state parties (governments and related services in 193 of the 195 states in the world) have already undertaken to assure these rights to all children, when ratifying the Convention.

Paradoxically, the one concept that is repeatedly presented as a right besides participation, is decision making by children. This is not mentioned in the Convention at all. Questions therefore arise about the widespread promotion of the mythic pair of UNCRC rights. Why is participation so often stripped of its real range of political meanings and reduced into decision-making? Is the dyad so popular because it can be firmly defined, organised and controlled, allowed or withheld, assessed and even costed by adults? Is formal closed talk, the decision, preferred to open-ended and potentially risky dynamic activity with power sharing between children and adults? Does the dyad fit more neatly into a classroom education model of teaching, and benefitting individual children who learn to participate, in contrast to campaigning for political change? Does the dyad endorse adults' decisions about who is competent, whose views can be given "due weight" (Article 12), and whom to include or exclude – contrary to the justice and equity resonating through the UNCRC?

Despite the straightjacket of its title and remit, I found this book an interesting and rewarding read. Many of the authors grapple with the above questions. Chapter ten lists problems in attempts to assess the benefits of students' participation. The hoped-for benefits may be too long-term, or too dependent on many other factors. They may be inadvertent, or unrelated to the initial project, or contested, or subjectively perceived. Refreshingly, these authors challenge assumptions that participation at school will, or should, increase confidence, self-esteem and voting rates later during adulthood. They say that adult decision making groups are assessed for

the effectiveness of their decisions, not for their enhanced skills or self esteem, and the same should apply to young people, who should be valued for their contributions, instead of adults imagining that adults confer the favour by allowing young people to take part. And informed awareness about democracy might rightly make young people more critical and cautious about voting.

There are good examples of adventurous respectful education in English schools despite oppressive national systems. There are better examples of ambitious projects around the world, many in very deprived areas, sometimes enduring harsh colonial legacies. Exciting and impressive examples include: democratic school councils and effective student protests to secure better conditions and governance in schools in Brazil and Zimbabwe; promotion of post-conflict peace-making in Africa and the Philippines; clubs working to reduce corporal punishment in Nepal; popular young radio broadcasters in Peru and in Ghana; children's parliaments in India and a conference in Moldova to inform and change public opinion about the UNCRC; small and larger schools in India working to respect cultural diversity; several chapters on the work of emancipatory young researchers.

The most interesting activities tended to be promoted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) rather than by education authorities. In Liverpool, Northern England, children aged from 7 years did inspiring work with an NGO to promote Fairtrade in their schools and a few of them travelled to London to present a *Young People's Manifesto* to a government minister. Not only did one school ignore their achievement, but teachers are quoted as dismissing and deriding the children. "You can't expect a 10-year old to make a decision," said one teacher of 10-year olds (83). A young Fairtrade steering group member, David, commented, "It is all very well getting us to participate and lead stuff, but have you thought about talking to the adults about it?" (85). He is right. To do otherwise is like teaching about sexism solely to women, or apartheid only to Black Africans.

Authors in the book debate whether participation in education is principled or pragmatic. Respecting, listening to children and working with them in 'all matters that affect' them (Article 12) surely involve the principles of respect, justice, equity and avoiding harm, which are also essential to the pragmatics of real teaching and learning. How is it possible to teach anyone without knowing what they already know and understand and can achieve? So following David's lead, besides recommending this book to everyone who is interested in promoting and learning more about children's rights, I hope the book will be read by all teachers, play and youth workers, and others who are in regular contact with children and young people.

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