

## Book Reviews

*Children as Decision Makers in Education: Sharing Experiences across Cultures* edited by Sue Cox, Anna Robinson-Pant, Caroline Dyer, and Michele Schweisfurth. London and New York: Continuum, 2010. 180 pp. \$140.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8264-2548-5.

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 in relation to disabled children (art. 23) and to cultural life and the arts only (art. 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 respect for the honor and reputation and the culture, dignity, and worth of every child (UNCRC arts. 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 195 of the 197 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 apart from 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, organized and controlled, allowed or withheld, assessed, and even costed by adults? Is formal closed talk preferred to

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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 benefiting 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" (art. 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 10 lists problems in an attempt to assess the benefits of student participation. The hoped-for benefits may be too long term or too dependent on many other factors. They may be inadvertent, unrelated to the initial project, 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 that the same should apply to young people, who should be valued for their contributions, instead of adults imagining that adults confer the favor 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 postconflict peacemaking 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 large schools in India working to respect cultural diversity, and several chapters on the work of emancipatory young researchers.

The most interesting activities tended to be promoted by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rather than by education authorities. In Liverpool, northern England, children from age 7 did inspiring work with an NGO to promote Fairtrade in their schools, and a few of them traveled 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 and listening to children and working with them in "all matters that affect" them (art. 12) surely involves 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 he or

she already knows and understands and can achieve? So, following David's lead, apart from 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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*Literacy for All: Making a Difference* by Agneta Lind. Paris: UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning, 2008. 147 pp. €15.00 (paper). ISBN 978-92-803-1313-0.

*Effective Literacy Programmes: Options for Policy-Makers* by John Oxenham. Paris: UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning, 2008. 140 pp. €15.00 (paper). ISBN 978-92-803-1318-5.

The 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien (Thailand) spurred a collective global movement to meet the basic learning needs of each person, with a special focus on developing countries. Ten years later, with the stated goals not met, and indeed far from it, the international community renewed its commitments in Dakar, Senegal. At the World Education Forum in 2000, national and organizational representatives resolved to improve educational opportunities and services and set six objectives for 2015, including a 50 percent increase in adult literacy. Despite this pledge and others (e.g., launch of the UN Literacy Decade in 2003), progress toward literacy for all, and for adults in particular, has been frustratingly slow. Agneta Lind, with *Literacy for All: Making a Difference*, and John Oxenham, with *Effective Literacy Programmes: Options for Policy-Makers*, describe and promote the significance of developing literacy skills in adults and call for an intensification of efforts to do so. Lind and Oxenham, each with extensive international experience in literacy program implementation and research, are very well equipped to write these two complementary volumes in UNESCO's Fundamentals of Educational Planning series.

Lind's book is concerned with both the concept and practice of literacy: learning to read and write, including numeracy, and the associated implications for individual, community, and national development. With both broad and nuanced arguments, Lind builds a strong case for the importance of investing in the development of adult literacy skills. She deals with general issues, such as why literacy is a basic human right, and she assesses details, like the program cost per successful adult literacy learner as compared with the costs associated with 4 years of primary school education across diverse contexts. With years of experience in development organizations, especially in Africa, Lind brings a wealth of information into her writing.

Lind begins with a summary of recent literacy statistics and an assessment of the complexities that have contributed to slow progress in developing literacy skills