

Commitment or Public Relations? A Review of *Empowering Children: Children's Rights Education as a Pathway to Citizenship*, R. Brian Howe and Katherine Covell, University of Toronto Press (0802038573, \$45.00, £28.00), 28 May 2005.

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Here we have an issue in development, potentially one of the most far-reaching that can be seriously considered, and one that will require extensive and unavoidable educational action. For readers of this journal, the book does not, however, invoke ICT – apart from a couple of remarks to the effect that a government's putting some material on a web-page is hardly an adequate fulfilment of its responsibilities in this area. But ICT-enhanced educational activity can certainly form a significant part of any adequate response, so perhaps we should look more closely.

For one outside the children's rights arena, perhaps the most striking fact Howe and Covell report is the near-universal ratification by members of the United Nations of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child <<http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm>> (apart from two rogue states, Somalia and the United States of America, that have only signed it – full details are available at <<http://www.unhchr.ch/pdf/report.pdf>>)¹. Ratification, as Howe and Covell explain, means that “states parties officially committed themselves to a policy of recognizing and implementing the rights of the child, not merely to aspiring to practise children's rights. Ratification constitutes a legally binding commitment, obligating states parties to bring their laws, policies, and practices into line with the standards set out in the Convention” (p. 25). The British, it is said, acquired their empire in a fit of absence of mind; one wonders whether the 192 ratifiers of the 1989 Convention were similarly afflicted: serious endeavour to undertake, or even to publicize the nature of their legal commitments is surprisingly hard to discern.²

Publicity is certainly required, for the Convention adopts a way of thinking about children (i.e. persons below the age of 18 years) that is by no means widely accepted or understood. I would guess that the normal reasonably enlightened view is a version of the “assumptions about parental rights and state paternalism in regard to children” (p. 26) that Howe and Covell see rejected by the Convention in favour of a view that “it now is children who have fundamental rights, and it is parents, adults, and state authorities who have obligations to respect and provide for those rights” (p. 26), rights that will be implemented in age-appropriate ways (“in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child,” Article 14). Related to this, Howe and Covell contrast a view of children as “becoming-citizens” or “not-yets”, on the way to acquiring full status in the community, with children as “being-citizens”, already citizens with definite rights. The Convention recognises both aspects (p. 62), but again I suspect most people would not venture far beyond what is appropriate for “becoming-citizens”.³

Education is then needed, not only for the children, but for the adult populations whose views have largely been superseded by the framers of the Convention. It is mandated by Article 42: “States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike.” But, given that a primary concern for at least part of childhood is with education in some sense or other, the very rights allotted to children by the Convention speak centrally to a right to education (Articles 28 and 29), and, as Howe and Covell argue (p. 29ff), several other articles implicitly require or impinge on educational action. The main concern of the book is with the nature of the children's rights education that has been offered so far and that might go some way to fulfilling the obligations entailed by the Convention.

After an introductory chapter, the book's second chapter briefly describes views about the status of children – very roughly a historical sequence starting with their being the property of their parents, through their being immature beings with rights to be cared for, to the Convention's "individual and independent persons with rights of their own" (p. 20) to limited participation and self-determination. It then looks at the educational consequences of the Convention and surveys what has actually happened in the field.

The third chapter focuses on the notion of children as citizens, not just as people on the path to citizenship. It begins with T.H. Marshall's understanding of citizenship, as legal standing within a nation plus a sense of belonging generated by recognition of a variety of rights. Howe and Covell then review more recent and controversial contributions to the "citizenship literature", emphasising a need to stress the responsibilities of citizenship, to recognise pluralistic or differentiated citizenship with its concomitant "group rights", and "to think of the global community as the most important setting for the practise of citizenship" (p. 54). They then look at what child citizenship might entail and conclude with some remarks on educational programmes in this area.

Chapter Four reviews ways in which citizenship has been taught and their shortcomings. The following chapter looks at a few examples of educational programmes devoted to children's rights, including one devised by the authors, and discusses their consequences. Chapter Six confronts some of the many obstacles to changing what goes on in schools (it begins with a nice quotation from Woodrow Wilson, "it is easier to change the location of a cemetery than to change the school curriculum"). It first rehearses again some general objections to the view of children and their rights espoused by the Convention and then moves on to examine the resistance teachers and the organisation of schools put up to curricular change. Howe and Covell go on to observe the yawning gap between the commitments entered into by governments and their lack of interest in implementation, suggesting (after 173 pages!) that perhaps governments are being hypocritical, or in their own words "have adopted a symbolic approach to implementing the Convention" (p. 179). Somehow the authors try to put an optimistic spin on all this by discerning some vestigial "prospects for change" (p. 180ff).

The authors point to a genuine problem: 192 governments have publicly committed themselves to a wholesale reorientation of their laws and practices, much of which flies in the face of vocal groups in their societies. The fact that they have made these, to my mind admirable, commitments⁴ gives us some ground for shaming them into taking action – not that shame is a very potent weapon in international affairs. But one wonders why they ever bothered: despite the authors' remark that the Convention "is not a partisan document" (p. 157) their acknowledgement of the large groups of adults who categorically reject its ideas demonstrates that that is precisely what it is. Our authors seem oblivious to the fact that democracy involves difference of opinion; they want to see "an emerging worldwide consciousness and consensus" (p. 181) where the reality is conflict.⁵ A fit of absence of mind is not much of an explanation, but I see no other for the signatories.

Our authors are cautiously optimistic, appealing to the fact that even hypocritical commitments on the part of the powerful can encourage people to demand their rights, that other groups – women, gays, the disabled – have made undeniable progress in many countries (though they do not make much of the fact that these groups have typically spoken for themselves, something younger children at any rate are going to find very difficult), and that successful advocacy can trigger imitation elsewhere. Apart from stressing the reasonableness of the view of children's rights at stake, Howe and Covell do not give us much advice on what exactly children's advocates should do to change attitudes, organisations, and curricula. In technologically advanced contexts, one would think that advocacy groups should find that children's eager adoption of ICTs should provide openings for collective consciousness-raising and collective action. But within the official

school setting, it confirms one point the authors make that the United Nations itself provides an on-line course in human rights, but not specifically on the rights of the child.

The book suffers from a certain amount of repetition, and from a chronic mistake of educational writing: saying that something will happen when all that can be seriously meant is that it is intended that it will. I have already alluded to their long-delayed recognition that perhaps governments never meant to do anything about the Convention – acknowledgement earlier might have suggested a recasting of the type of argument in the rest of the book. But Howe and Covell have brought to our attention a fascinating range of issues where reflection and programmes of rational critique may well serve to catalyse significant socio-political change, and where the little that has so far been achieved seems to point in desirable directions.⁶

Endnotes:

- ¹ Howe and Covell tell us that “As a signatory to the Convention, the United States is at least obligated not to adopt policies contrary to it” (p. 26).
- ² A UN Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors compliance with the convention. Its web-site <<http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/index.htm>> provides access to a large number of documents, though not offered in an easily accessible manner. The regular reports the CRC is meant to receive and analyse from individual countries can be found at <http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf> - perhaps most easily by checking Documents By Treaty and then CRC.
- ³ It is tempting to see our authors as caught in the same trap, since their subtitle, with its talk of a “pathway” to citizenship, sits much better with the idea of children as developing towards a future status than as possessors of one now.
- ⁴ Admirable, although marred perhaps by “lack of precision and general vagueness” in some crucial articles, as a Caribbean commentator has remarked (Zanifa McDowell, *Elements of Child Law in the Commonwealth Caribbean*, University of the West Indies Press, 2000, p. 241). She goes on to deplore the absence of a parent’s supposed “right to administer necessary corporal punishment to a child who is disrespectful, rude, violent, or deserving of such punishment” (p. 242), and suggests that the Convention contains several other “cultural biases”. Given the prevalence of oppression and authoritarianism in the world generally, a defence of any one’s rights is inevitably going to be culturally loaded. Howe and Covell err, however, by supposing that an appeal to a country’s ratification of the Convention can supplant genuine and principled argument in support of the freedoms it tries to establish.
- ⁵ They display a curiously totalitarian dogmatism at times: it is just wrong to think that wives are appendages and possessions of their husbands, and that children are similarly the property of their parents (p. 152); the phrase “whether citizens approve of it or not” appears twice (p. 153, 155) where such citizens are told that their views have been summarily rejected by their governments. What has become of legitimate opposition?
- ⁶ They start off with the important point that attention to children’s rights tends to make children more concerned for the plight of others than for their own ability to do as they please. Perhaps only nasty traditionalists would have such a low opinion of themselves as to make this surprising, but given the prevalence of such traditionalists it is a point worth making.

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