

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

R. BRIAN HOWE AND KATHERINE COVELL, *Empowering Children: Children's Rights Education as a Pathway to Citizenship*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. 245 p. Index.

In *Empowering Children*, R. Brian Howe and Katherine Covell present their argument for implementing a novel form of citizenship education in schools. According to the authors, most existing citizenship education programs (many of which they review) have failed to cultivate in children the qualities which they believe are in “the broad interests of a liberal democratic and rights-based society,” such as awareness and tolerance of others; “active, attentive, responsible, and critically-minded” behaviours; and the “willingness to question authority” (78). This is because so many programs focus on instructing children in the roles and duties which they will occupy and perform only as adults, as *future* citizens. A better approach, say Howe and Covell, is to place children's rights education at the program's centre. They reason that by educating children in the legal rights which they hold as individuals *right now*, children are encouraged to see *themselves* (and not only adults) as members of society, as citizens deserving of a voice, and with a duty to express that voice in support of maintaining their rights and those of others.

Howe and Covell have developed curricula along these lines and provide evidence from Canada, England and Belgium of the success of their and similar programs. Children's rights education is shown to improve children's understanding of their rights as individuals and, as important, the responsibilities that derive from learning to respect the rights of others; cultivate behaviours that create a more caring classroom climate; enhance children's self-esteem; encourage rights-respecting values; and reduce “socially irresponsible” conduct such as bullying and teasing (130-149). Their program uses the 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (henceforth, the Convention) as the focus of instruction. The Convention specifies special standards in children's health care, education, and legal, civil and social services, and provides ideal fodder for a children's rights-based curricula. More than this, say the authors, it flags the commitment, indeed the *legal obligation*, of the state signatories of the Convention to implement such curricula. The Convention is unique among human rights treaties in that it requires signatories not only to recognise but *promote* children's rights awareness among its citizens. Thus, according to Howe and Covell, citizenship education that is centred on teaching children about their rights serves a double purpose: it nurtures good citizenship qualities

in children and allows states to satisfy the education requirements of the Convention.

This is a neat package, and one whose outcomes as reported by Howe and Covell, is promising. But if their approach inspires, it also exasperates, because it is presented in a way that continually brackets the political and structural conditions which surround and impede the possibility of widespread adoption of children's rights education. For example, the authors consistently uphold the Convention as ground-breaking, and the principles it contains as historic. "Parents and state authorities are no longer assumed to have fundamental rights" (in their relations with children) the authors declare; "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" (26). An exhilarating pronouncement, but it cannot help but sound hollow in light of the realities of children at risk around the globe – child sex workers, child labourers, child soldiers –as well as the realities of child citizens in the most developed countries who are regularly denied the social services that are their "right" because of their government's neo-liberal policies, or watch their citizenship rights evaporate when their non-citizen parents are deported (see Jacqueline Bhabha's article in Vol. 15 of *Differences*). Further, most of the state signatories of the Convention (all UN countries have ratified the document, save for Somalia and the US) have failed to implement *any* of its conditions (25-40). Given the massive neglect of this document by world powers, which the authors themselves concede, it is often difficult to share in their optimism that the strictly *symbolic* support which the Convention has thus far garnered suggests that we are moving toward its actual implementation (40-42; 180-183). The authors may acknowledge these conditions but they do not place them as central to their presentation as they should be.

Most uncertain is Howe and Covell's hope that states will embrace their particular brand of citizenship education. Political thinkers and citizenship studies theorists might agree, as the authors report, that the "ideal" liberal-democratic citizen is the active, tolerant and critically-minded individual the authors' curricula is designed to produce (41-56 and *passim*). But what is good for democracy may not necessarily be good for state interests seeking to minimise challenges to their rule, a fact that Howe and Covell fail to address properly. Throughout most of the book, the authors imply a curious separation of state-regulated schooling and the state itself. While they are adamant that the national education system can deliver citizenship training more consistently and uniformly than other institutions (such as family or community and volunteer groups) (77-78), they proceed as if schools are somehow independent of the practical concerns of state leaders, with the freedom to implement a curricula committed to producing a citizenry wary of authorities. It is true that national education is no longer as openly promoted by political leaders today as in the past as a tool through which they can fashion citizens useful to their needs (see, e.g., Alan Ball's article in the 1993 issue of the *Russian Review*, and Stephen Heathorn's book *For Home, Country, and Race*). It is, nevertheless, a connection that remains evident in the resistance of traditionally

conservative groups to embrace children's rights education (3-5), for example, and in the emphasis of recent "citizenship education" programs such as Britain's, more concerned with creating subjects adept at navigating the global economy than enhancing students' skills in democratic participation (9). The response of conservatives represents more than parents' fears that such curricula will undermine their ability to control their children, as the authors suggest (3-5); Britain's programs are not just based on a mistaken (and hence correctable) conception that such training will lead to greater political engagement. They are based in much larger questions of state power and the uncertainty a critical citizenry could introduce to the maintenance of that power.

Again, Howe and Covell do not ignore these matters completely. But such significant "challenges" to children's rights education are not tackled directly until the final pages of the book, and receive scant attention: barely six pages (174-180) as compared to the over twenty devoted to difficulties associated with convincing teachers to take on a new curriculum, and the obstacles presented by traditional (individual, psychological) attitudes toward children as the "property" of adults incapable of understanding the language of rights (150-173). The result is an analysis of children's rights education that downplays the historical and structural context within which it has been proposed, making for an inspirational read, perhaps, but one that does little to help us to understand the real political barriers hindering widespread adoption of such curricula.

By critiquing the idealism of *Empowering Children*, I do not mean that we should despair of children's rights education; the results of Howe and Covell's curricula testing demonstrate the utility and desirability of such programs. But their cause could be better promoted by a more pragmatic and thorough assessment of the "bigger" picture to help explore ways in which the many obstacles to such instruction might be overcome.

Karen Stanbridge, *Memorial University of Newfoundland*.