

EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: CHALLENGES AND CHOICES FOR THE FUTURE

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Summary

Many obstacles stand in the way of the emphasis in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that all children have the right to an education. Countless children are denied access to education as a result of poverty and hardship, and further inequities exist in the gender imbalance among those who do not participate in school. Governments are also often unable to commit themselves to the Convention's prime emphasis on free and compulsory access to education. Children's voices have also not been heard as clearly or as strongly as they might be by adults, who often act on behalf of children rather than with children. The article considers the implications of this situation, and argues for an integrated approach to connecting education comprehensively to the daily lives of children, their families, and their wider communities. The task of addressing this goal will involve educators and policy-makers in a consideration of such factors as how to integrate educational settings within the community, the degree of flexibility of educational systems, and the extent to which educational curricula can be formulated to meet the long term needs of children by assisting them to develop skills, attitudes, and outlooks necessary to function successfully as adults. The Convention remains a key expression of children's rights in education. The promotion of values, outlooks, and attitudes that are concerned with furthering the objectives set out in the Convention are vital in assisting educators to ensure that their curricula remain accountable to their prime constituencies: children, their parents/caregivers, and the wider community.

1. Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the right of all children to an education. In order for this to be achieved, the Convention places a concomitant responsibility on all countries to ensure that primary, secondary, higher, and vocational education is accessible to all. It also stresses the need for educational programs to incorporate aims directed towards fostering children's broader cultural attitudes, and outlooks as well as their personality, talents and mental and physical growth and development. The framing of the Convention thus recognizes the potential benefit of education to offer children the knowledge, skills, outlooks, and insights to function effectively in the world now and in the future. These goals are far from being realized, and the consequences of this gap between policy and reality are far reaching. The importance of education for children's long term growth and development was recognized by the UN in 2001 through its release of its first General Comment 'The Aims of Education.' The challenge still remains, however, as to how best we can transform the underlying ethics and values enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child into a working reality so that children now, and in the future can live their lives with dignity and hope.

2. Access and Participation

2.1 Issues of Equity

Countless children around the world are deprived of a basic education. In 2008 it is estimated that 75 million primary-aged children are not enrolled in school – 55% of whom are girls- and only a minority of children receives secondary school education as several million children drop out of school each year. Poverty and lack of resources are major contributing factors. Many children work to raise money for their families who cannot afford to send them to the local school. Further inequities exist in the gender imbalance among those who do participate in education. Two thirds of the global population of girls and young women does not attend school as a result of varying social, cultural and religious requirements and expectations.

The global consequences of this trend for furthering the inextricably linked cycles of poverty and inequity are inestimable. One quantifiable indicator, which can be cited, is the nearly one billion adults in the world today who are unable to read or write. Recognition on the part of world governments of the enormity of the problem was evident at the 1990 World Summit for Children. The Summit set the need for all children to receive a basic education as one of its top ten global priorities. It also set the primary objectives of a completion rate for primary school education of at least 80% of children, together with the halving of the adult illiteracy rate and the achievement of equal educational opportunity for males and females by the year 2000. This commitment was continued with Millennium Goal 2 set at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 that aspires to achieve universal education. A key target within this goal is to ensure that, by 2015, all children will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. Until these aims are acted upon systematically by world governments and converted into a reality, however, the very real danger exists that the legal and moral precedents set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child towards education shall be remembered in future decades as empty rhetoric.

The implications for these children, their families and the communities to whom they belong are far-reaching. Young children are exposed and vulnerable in relation to the systems of administration and power developed by their elders. They must rely on the laws and conventions adopted by adults to ensure that their basic rights are being met. Adults, for their part, often act more directly in their own interests than for those of their charges. The Convention has addressed this issue by setting minimum legal and moral standards to protect children, and by addressing children's issues as basic human rights so that they can be developed on an equal footing with those of adults. Yet while the central objectives of access to, and participation in, education systems remain unrealized, the future lives of millions of children and their families will remain locked into cycles of poverty and suffering. Education remains fundamental to children at every stage of their growth and development. The Convention tends to focus attention on the primary school system and beyond, yet if we are truly committed to fostering young children's growth, we also need to include early childhood education among our highest priorities. The importance of this has been underscored by the significant body of international research, which has stressed the importance of a sound early childhood educational program for both the short- and long-term development of children, particularly those children from poor and underprivileged backgrounds. The importance of enacting children's rights in the early years of development has been recognized more formally by the UN with its release of General Comment No. 7 *'Implementing Child Rights In Early Childhood.'*

Free and compulsory education systems thus remain a critical priority for those formulating government policy. The ultimate achievement of this objective would transform the lives of millions of young men and women, as they would become equipped with the skills, outlooks, and knowledge to make genuine choices over their lives and to pursue new opportunities. Such a transformation would be beneficial to the social and economic imperatives of the adults' world just as much, as it would enrich children's future prospects with new skills and knowledge. In the current global environment of a hard, outcomes-based economic rationalism, however, such seemingly indirect, and long-term, objectives are often placed relatively low on the priority list of government policy makers.

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Biographical Sketch

Jane Page is Deputy Director of The Center for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, The University of Melbourne, Australia. Her work on futures education and children's rights has been twice recognised by L'Eta^ Verde Associazione Culturale, a Rome-based international research organisation, who awarded her the Aurelio Peccei Prize in 1996 and 2001. Jane's PhD research explored young children's capacity to enact citizenship as a practice of participation in their relationships with friends in early childhood settings and the role of emotions in this process.

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