

Schooling Through a Human Rights Lens

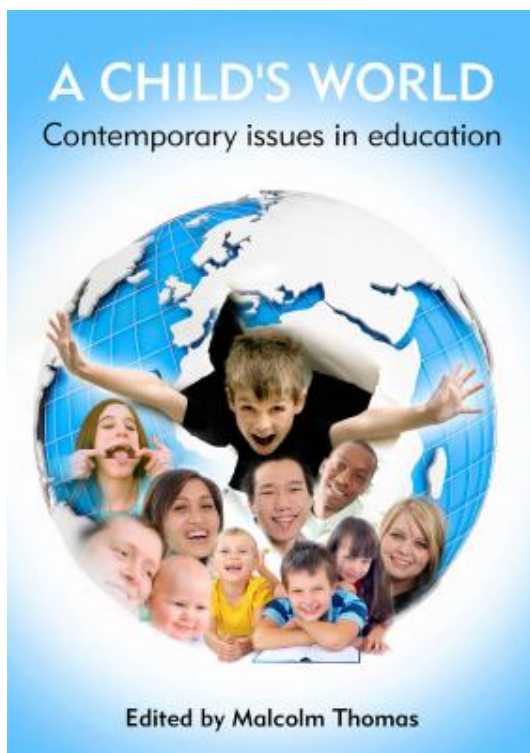
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THEMATIC FOCUS

The focus of this chapter is the relationship between the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and schooling. The Convention is proposed as a relevant and practical lens through which our thinking about schooling might be re-evaluated and re-energised. The UNCRC is seen as reflecting developments in society's thinking about children and its focus on the best interests of children and young people is regarded as critically important. Tensions between some traditions within schooling and the underlying values of the Convention are put forward as giving rise to particular challenges for educational policy makers and practitioners. The challenges range from the conduct of day-to-day relationships to the curriculum, from governance issues to leadership practices. Some implications for teacher-education are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Improving the world of children is inextricably tied up with improving schools. Deep educational change is a slow process and schools often demonstrate a robust resilience to innovation (Barth 2001; Eisner, 1992; Gleeson 2010; Jeffers, 2011; Sarason 1996). When asked how schools today differ from those of, say, thirty years ago, many point to new technologies such as data

projectors and the availability of the internet as a learning tool. Less obvious, though arguably very significant, has been the growing appreciation of children's rights, the consequent reimagining of childhood and the working out of the implications of such perspectives for 21st century schooling.

An anecdote may illustrate the point. Recently, following a meeting with a group of parents in a primary school, the Principal recounted a telling incident to two parents and myself. The school had organised a 'Respect' week and earlier that morning a 10 year-old had knocked on her door. He was not happy with the way a relatively new teacher had spoken to his class. 'I don't think she understands 'respect' correctly', he confided. What struck me was the way Principal and parents were approving of the child's confidence, initiative and 'matter-of-factness' in sharing his point of view about a teacher. I found myself contrasting this with personal memories of my own schooldays, when getting 'biffed' with a leather strap was commonplace (Ireland did not outlaw corporal punishment until 1982). Had I complained to the Principal - or for that matter, my parents - I suspect their response would have been along the lines 'But you must have done something wrong'. Times have changed.

SCHOOLING

Schooling has a long and often distinguished history. The origins of many

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important human achievements can be traced back to stimulating classroom environments, inspirational teachers and a solid foundation of learning specific knowledge, skills and values. However, schools are often criticised as falling short of meeting contemporary needs and many national systems are currently busy following 'reform agendas'. The perceived weaknesses of schools are extensive. These include, for example, disappointing outcomes, student passivity, boredom, lack of care, unequal power relations, and cultures of excessive measurement (Claxton, 2008; Devine, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Lynch and Lodge, 1999; Noddings, 2005; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Wolk, 2007). The challenges associated with increased ethnic, cultural and

religious diversity is also a significant one for schools in some countries (Jeffers and O'Connor, 2008; Osler and Starkey, 2005; Smyth *et al.*, 2009).

Ball (1997: 317) has described schools as “complex, contradictory, sometimes incoherent organisations, like many others”. Over time “a *bricolage* of memories, commitments, routines, bright ideas and policy effects” change and influence schools. He adds that what we understand by ‘the school’ results from the combination of various discourses that may sit uncomfortably together. Such discourses, according to Ball “are typically entangled and confused and they are obscured by micropolitical struggles, tactical plunderings, disguises and ploys” (Ibid. p.318).

Baker *et al.* (2004: 140), for example, illustrate such tensions well when they note that schools were not designed primarily as “institutions of liberation and enlightenment”, though these were some of their goals. As agents of social control, schools also adopted the role of selecting, labelling and stratifying students by gender, age and levels of attainment.

Views on children and their learning in schools have been undergoing revision. The work of Howard Gardner (1984) has been particularly influential in seeing individual learners, with their ‘multiple intelligences’, as having distinct needs and, therefore, requiring varied learning contexts.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Today, the moral dimensions of many enterprises are frequently framed in the language of ‘human rights’. Increasingly, a human rights discourse informs discussions about schooling. The *UN Declaration of Human Rights* (UNDHR) (United Nations, 1948) offered a focused framework to educators and others. In particular, Article 26 asserts everyone’s right to education, that elementary education should be compulsory and free and that parents have a prior right to chose the kind of education. Furthermore, it states that:

“Education shall be directed to the full development of the human

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personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace”. (Ibid. Article 26, 2)

In tandem with growing disenchantments with traditional schooling, popular discourse about many social policies and practices increasingly invokes the language of human rights. Governments and policy makers can readily subscribe to the rhetoric of human rights without necessarily thinking through the implications. One powerful example is the speed with which so many nations ratified *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989).

The fundamental thrust of the UNCRC – which defines ‘children’ as those under 18 years of age - can sit uncomfortably with well established practices within schooling. Traditionally, children and young people were often viewed as passive recipients rather than the active participants suggested in the Convention. Teachers, irrespective of whether they work in disadvantaged, privileged or mixed contexts, sometimes struggle with the simple idea that the people in front of them in their classrooms have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Ibid. Article 12). Indeed, Paulo Friere’s (1971) critique of the ‘banking concept’ of education continues to be relevant and challenging. The remainder of this chapter explores the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* as a framework for looking at schools in a fresh way.

Human Rights in Schools

The way any society organises its schools has ramifications that stretch far and wide into all aspects of social life. Consequently, schooling policies and practices play a key role in shaping any emerging society. If we aspire to a

society that respects human rights and respects differences, teaching the necessary skills and dispositions to live in that society must start at a young age. Home and school have critically important roles to play so that the humanity of all people is respected while differences - whether by gender, age, skin colour, ethnic background, religious affiliation, culture or other attributes - are recognised and accepted.

Increasingly there is international evidence that education about human rights and education based on human rights can contribute to developing inclusive, tolerant societies and in fighting discrimination, racism and xenophobia (e.g. Banks, 2007; Bush and Saltarelli, 2000, Irish Human Rights Commission 2011; Reardon, 1997). Education is valued, argue Baker *et al.* (2004: 141) because of “its intrinsic worth for all human beings and because it is indispensable in achieving other human rights, including the right to economic

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well-being and good health”. When, in 2000, world leaders agreed on eight key Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015, universal primary schooling was a central aspiration. While evidence suggests that this goal will not be reached, increased participation rates in many poor countries is making some impact (United Nations, 2010: 16).

Globally, there is widespread evidence of human rights abuses. However, UNESCO has identified a direct link between the quality of a country’s school system and dispositions towards violence (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2011: 257). Thus, in terms of wider public policies regarding conflict reduction, social well-being and a more harmonious society, high quality schooling is crucially important. That previous sentence looks, on the surface, like one of those broad, even bland, generalisations that people nod towards in agreement but which, in effect, change little. But, unpacking its meaning points to the realisation that ‘high quality schooling’, particularly in the spirit of article 26 of the UNDHR, is far from the universal experience of children. Critics (e.g. Claxton, 2008: 16; Harber, 2004: 2; Holt, 1974: 187; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004: 157) point to the unequal power between young people and adults in schools, to their

undemocratic character, assert that schools continually emphasise their benefits but suppress the weaknesses, have high levels of truancy as well as poor literacy levels and poor examination achievements generally. Frequently, at the heart of these criticisms is the failure of many schools to enable young people to become the active participants envisioned in the UNCRC and the almost default orientation towards rewarding compliant and passive behaviour. From a reform perspective, critics tend to lay particular emphasis on a need for 'student voice' to be much more 'real' at all age levels both inside and outside classrooms. Applying the UNCRC towards schooling leads, almost inevitably, to a critical examination of how well schools and school systems serve young people. A thorough audit of the policies and practices associated with any school's day-to-day procedures can challenge the teaching team in particular as to how much the school is, in reality, a site for the realisation of the UNCRC. Such analysis begins with the question of what role the students might play in conducting the audit and leads in to issues around 'respect' but also practices as varied as dress, when to stand and when to sit, when to speak and when to stay silent, homework, participation in extra-curricular activities, and access to school records. In some countries, corporal punishment is still regarded as 'normal' and is an obvious starting point for 'reform'.

Tracking significant national policy initiatives consequent on the ratification of the UNCRC can be instructive. In Ireland, the emergence of a national children's strategy (Government of Ireland, 2000) helped frame a new vision of childhood:

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"An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential" (Ibid: 4)

Legislation (Government of Ireland, 2002). led to the appointment of an Ombudsman for Children. This Office of the Ombudsman is increasingly acting as a children/young people's champion and commenting on school related issues. Perhaps significantly, the national children's strategy had little to say, explicitly, about schools..

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The 1989 UNCRC, which has since been ratified in almost 200 states, is built on the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. A convention, it is worth noting, is a binding treaty and, so, has consequences for States that ratify it. The UNCRC sees children as entitled to special care and assistance. It is especially supportive of the family:

“as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community” (United Nations, 1989: preamble).

The convention highlights, repeatedly, the values of dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is sensitive to the importance of traditions and cultural values for the protection and harmonious development of the child. Very significantly, the Convention states (Article 3) that “in all actions concerning children..... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”. This shift from its 1959 forerunner is a radical development. The 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child had, in fact, already evoked the principle, stating that “the best interests of the child shall be the paramount consideration” in the enactment of laws relating to children, as well as “the guiding principle of those responsible for (the child's) education

and guidance". The 1989 Convention extends the principle to cover *all* decisions affecting the child. The best interests of the child should now be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children - not just actions taken by the state authorities, parliamentary assemblies and judicial bodies but also those taken by relevant private institutions, including schools.

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The provision in Article 12 that the child who is capable of forming his or her own views has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child - the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with age and maturity - is also a critically important step forward in any process of restating the common values to which all schools should subscribe. A truly child-centred education will facilitate the respectful hearing of each child's voice (Lundy, 2007).

Historically, one can see the vision of childhood embedded in the UNCRC in sharp contrast to one where children are seen primarily in terms of the major functions of generational continuity, cheap labour and as a form of security in old age (Devine, 1999, p.16). Alderston (1999) contends that children are the last group to be denied rights and to be discriminated against openly and with impunity. She contends that 'children' are still partly stranded in a feudal time warp (before rights became central aspects of human relationships) with its disadvantages but few of its advantages. She cites an expectation from parents of obedience and loyalty to teachers, including physical and mental submission, qualities not only untypical in other human relationships but not much modelled by adults (Alderston, 1999: 186). Her work prompts the question: is the children's rights movement following in the footsteps of women's rights, the rights of black people, the rights of people with disabilities?

The UNCRC can be seen as making more explicit Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights mentioned earlier. Articles 29 and 42, in particular, recognise education in human rights as essential features of educational provision.

Many other articles in the Convention further clarify specific rights that all children should enjoy and, therefore, carry implications for schools. The spirit of the UNCRC would suggest that schools should be primary sites where young people's rights are respected and realised.

Some particular challenges for school come into sharp relief when viewed through the lens of article 29. This sets out five key goals to which a child's education should be directed. They are:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
 - (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
 - (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
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- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
 - (e) The development of respect for the natural environment (United Nations, 1989).

Specifically, article 42 includes an important assertion, namely that all young people have the right to know about their rights. School, it seems reasonable to assume, is a vitally important location where they might learn about these rights.

Overall, the UNCRC can be viewed as an important progression in the promotion and safeguarding of children's rights worldwide. It is increasingly instrumental in shaping cultural norms and legal frameworks so that it can be regarded as an agreed set of non-negotiable standards and obligations. Thus,

it is a very appropriate lens through which schools might examine themselves and might even reformulate their core mission. As Carter and Osler (2000: 338) observe “Although any new understanding (of human rights) will not be achieved through formal education alone, the role of schools in either reinforcing or challenging inequality and injustice should not be underestimated”.

Core Values

The core values of the UNCRC can be identified as:

- Non-discrimination;
- Commitment to the best interests of the child;
- The right to life, survival and development;
- Respect for the views of the child.

These core values might offer schools one effective starting point for self-evaluation. Making an explicit commitment to these values or to the UNCRC generally, could even become part of the employment contract for all those working in schools. Education ministries and national teaching councils might incorporate a commitment to the values of the UNCRC into the codes of conduct of teachers and others working within schools.

Survival, Protection, Development and Participation

The articles of the UNCRC can be grouped into rights that focus on the four areas of survival, protection, development and participation. These categories, which might be seen as sequential or progressive, provide a

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further framework for school self-evaluation to ensure that the organisation is responding adequately to children at each level. Thus, if children are coming to school hungry, then their learning is going to be greatly facilitated if the school provides food before classes begin and, possibly, during the course of the day. In some schools the provision of clean drinking water may also be an issue. A focus on protection rights such as Articles 11 (from kidnapping), 16

(privacy), 19 and 34 (from abuse), 21 (if adopted or fostered), 22 (refugees), 32 and 36 (from exploitation), 33(from drugs), 38 (from war), 40 and 41 (legal protection) draws attention to schools' particular responsibilities for the safety, care and welfare of their students.

Day-to-day Interactions

If we are serious about looking at human rights cultures within schools, a central concern has to be the quality of the day-to-day relationships students experience with fellow students, with staff and with the school's leaders. School leaders who wish to nurture a school culture characterised by non-discrimination, care, dignity and mutual respect among all should find a close familiarity with the UNCRC supportive. It may also prompt them to see the importance of teaching children about their rights. Covell *et al.* (2010: 118) write about 'children's rights education' which they describe as "a form of education that takes seriously the view that children are rights-holders and citizens, that schools are democratic communities where children learn (or fail to learn) the values and practice of citizenship, and that educating children about their basic human rights – including their rights of participation – is a legal obligation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child". School leaders will also find the survival and protection dimensions of the UNCRC supportive of broader school policies concerning children's basic well-being. For example, a persistent theme within many articles of the UNCRC is the recognition of each child as unique, with rights to a name and nationality (Article 7), a protected identity (Article 8), to express opinions (Article 12-15), and to practice their culture, religion and language (Article 30). These can be seen as closely linked to an individual's sense of psychological well-being (Carter and Osler, 2000).

A further self-evaluation perspective for a school staff is to monitor how conflicts between students are resolved and, critically, how teachers deal with student-teacher conflicts, when they arise. Carter and Osler maintain that "A human rights framework offers a set of principles by which schools can enable conflicts to be resolved peacefully and equitably and for young people to act in the holistic interests of the wider community" (Carter and Osler, 2000: 338).

Furthermore, while teacher-teacher conflicts might be regarded as outside the scope of this discussion, how they are resolved, or not, can impact strongly on

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the children in the care of such teachers.

While a school's policies and practices may be quite effective in promoting young people's survival, protection and development rights, ensuring the realisation of participation rights can be more challenging. A useful indicator relating to participation can be the extent to which young people's views on their own schooling are seriously sought. According to Rudduck and Flutter:

“....hearing what pupils have to say about teaching, learning and schooling enables teachers to look at things from the pupil perspective – and the world of school can look very differently from this angle. Being prepared – and being able – to see the familiar differently and to contemplate alternative approaches, roles and practices is the first step towards fundamental change in classrooms and schools”. (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004: 141)

[Embedding Human Rights Perspectives within the Curriculum](#)

Article 42 of the UNCRC may appear deceptively simple. It reads: “States Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike” (United Nations, 1989). In terms of national curricula, embedding education for human rights in school programmes seems a logical and practical way for States to discharge their responsibilities under article 42. In practice, dedicated courses or modules on aspects of citizenship education, with children's rights as a central concern, should be key features of every school's offering. Teachers' sensitivity to the UNCRC will also enable the identification of children's rights as a cross-curricular theme. For example, when teachers of history, geography, literature, science and other subjects make connections with the UNCRC, children see the pervasive relevance of a rights perspective. Furthermore, the UNCRC's vision of young people as active participants

carries implications for teaching and learning methodologies, not least challenging approaches that cultivate passivity and compliance. A UNCRC perspective on learning can also give fresh energy and relevance to the writings of Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey and Gardner, *inter alia*.

Deeper explorations of the implications of the UNCRC for school curricula are also worth considering. Noddings' (2005) analysis is especially relevant. She regards the traditional organisation of schooling, including curriculum, as intellectually and morally inadequate for contemporary society. She contends that education should be organised around themes of 'care' rather than the traditional disciplines. Specifically, she envisages a general education that guides young people "in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world, and ideas" (Ibid: 173).

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School Organisation and Governance Through a Human Rights Lens

In my classes with teachers and student teachers, I sometimes present small groups with a particular challenge based on the UNCRC. Each article is printed on a card and the group is invited to discuss and then agree on the six articles that they think are most relevant to schooling. The ensuing debates can be heated and the process facilitates familiarity with the UNCRC and the associated issues. Consistently Articles 3, 12, 29 and 42 feature in the teachers' selections. Taking the thrust of these articles together (the child's best interests, the right to be consulted, the direction of education, the right to be informed) it is difficult to imagine any school being governed without the active participation of young people. Good schools have always developed young people's sense of active involvement in and 'ownership' of their schools. Governance does not simply refer to who sits on the Board of Management, important though that is, but seeps right down to how rules and procedures are negotiated and developed in each classroom, from junior infants upwards. The challenge is to follow the spirit of Article 12 where "the child who is capable of forming his or her own views" should enjoy "the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the

child” while at the same time, not underestimating children’s capacities or patronising them.

The emergence of student councils is often taken as an indicator of a school’s embracing of a human rights agenda. But student councils have to go beyond tokenism if they are to have credibility with young people. For example, in his study of inequality and stereotyping, Devlin (2006) found that young people’s views on school councils and similar initiatives were unenthusiastic. His informants “felt most strongly about not being listened to (or not being believed if their ‘story’ conflicted with that of an adult) and not having a say in how schools were run” (Devlin, 2006: 64).

Given schooling’s strong authoritarian traditions, the dispositions of members of teacher interviewing panels and those appointed to boards of management also need to be informed by the UNCRC.

The UNCRC for School Leaders

Earlier, when discussing day-to-day relationships, the role of the school leader was highlighted. This was based on the view that a major contribution all school leaders make is to influence the culture of the schools where they work

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and that, at its heart, school leadership is a fundamentally moral pursuit (Fullan 2004, 2012). Every school leader grapples with competing pressures from different stakeholders as well as “a myriad of moral problems and ethical dilemmas” (Frick and Frick, 2010: 117). Parents, teachers and Ministries of Education often have varying interpretations of what is in children’s best interests. There can be times too when the child’s best interest may not be their foremost consideration. Effective and ethical school leadership, following the UNCRC, needs to respond meaningfully to the thrust of Articles 3 and 12 in particular. In short, school leaders have to become champions of children’s rights. As Stefkovich and Begley (2007: 220) observe, “in some forms, *best interests of students* is more organizational or policy-related rhetoric than a genuine regard for student well-being, for example, as in the case of zero tolerance policies”. Starrat (2012), in focusing on cultivating an ethical school,

frames key intellectual and moral learning through three interrelated curricula - academic, social and civic.

At this stage many readers may be thinking along similar lines to what many student-teachers and teachers have voiced to me: “this is all very well and good, *in theory*, but, *in practice*, schools need order and discipline”. Or, more bluntly, “too much of this UNCRC stuff could lead to anarchy”. Not everyone is convinced that a human rights approach to school will lead to a better ordered, more disciplined student body and it can be difficult to convince the sceptical. Anyone who attempts to teach a class of young people or facilitate a learning activity outside the classroom quickly realises the need for structure, for some ground rules to which everyone adheres. There is an ethical tightrope to be walked between respect for individual freedoms and rights on the one hand and concern for the common good of the group on the other. Starkey’s (1992, quoted in Osler 2005: 11) linking of the concepts of reciprocity, universality, indivisibility and solidarity offers a promising framework for dealing with such tensions in school contexts. These remind us that the system is for all people (universality) and that an attack on any part of the system is an attack on the whole system (indivisibility). The school is fundamentally a social system where people depend on each other (reciprocity) and are also willing to consider and take action to defend the rights of others (solidarity).

Blum and Libbey (2004) discuss the idea of ‘school connection’. They describe this as the belief by students that adults in school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. The critical elements needed for students to experience this level of connectedness include: (1) high academic expectations and rigor coupled with support for learning; (2) positive adult-student relationships; and (3) safety: both physical and emotional.

If schools are to take the UNCRC seriously, to become sites of respect for children's rights in vision and in practice, then how teachers engage with the UNCRC is critically important. Such engagement should begin at the initial teacher education stage but also be a staple feature of continuing professional development. Darling-Hammond (2006: 275) notes that "public dissatisfaction with schools has been coupled with dissatisfaction with schools of education as well". She sees explicit preparation for teaching diverse learners as an important recent advance in the field of teacher education (Ibid. p. 223). In learning to teach for social justice, she identifies careful attention to placements, an ecological view of human development, integration of multicultural concerns (not isolated in a single course), commitment to social action and a willingness to struggle with issues of race and class as important building blocks for an 'equity pedagogy'. An appreciation of the UNCRC fits comfortably into such a vision. Osler and Starkey (1996: 102) contend that "without basic knowledge of human rights principles" student teachers are unlikely to be able to work effectively towards social justice education.

In my work as a teacher educator I have found that student-teachers as well as established ones, including those aspiring to positions of school leadership, generally respond well to the UNCRC as a framework for interrogating aspects of schooling. Those in initial teacher education often assert that their own schooldays were not particularly characterised by respect for their rights. Their idealism often impels them to want to ensure that their students encounter pedagogic practices that respect their rights. More experienced teachers display a wide array of views ranging from enthusiastic endorsement of UNCRC values to strong concern for inherited and established practices. While integrating a series of explorations of the UNCRC into initial teacher education programmes is both desirable and possible, grafting a UNCRC perspective onto more established courses and modules may be more challenging. For established teachers interested in 'transforming their world and their work' (Liebermann and Miller, 1999) the UNCRC provides a challenging but rewarding framework for self-reflection and self-evaluation.

Some Additional Issues

A school that engages seriously with the UNCRC will find itself re-imagining many aspects of its established practices. School admission policies can become ethical minefields as difficult decisions to include and exclude are made in oversubscribed schools. Decisions can impact strongly on children and their families and can contribute to particular views of 'fairness'. Thus, just and transparent admission policies are vital for any school with aspirations to

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ethical behaviour. As the UNCRC applies to all children, those referred to as having 'special needs' deserve particular attention at all levels of school provision.

How well we value the participation rights of children and young people within the UNCRC is often severely tested when it comes to planning and design for school extensions or new buildings. Consulting young people for their views in ways that go beyond the tokenism, decoration and manipulation that Roger Hart identifies in his ladder of participation (Hart 1997) makes a lot of sense, as they will be the main users of the newly built spaces. Finally, Noddings' (2005) persistent focus on 'care', and the perceived lack of it, reminds us of young people's needs and rights in school to services other than teaching. Some schools offer ready and confidential access to comprehensive guidance and counselling while others still see such a service, sadly, as, at best, some kind of optional extra.

DISCUSSION

The UNCRC is a major international policy document that the vast majority of countries have ratified. Its implications for schools are far reaching and sometimes the values underpinning the UNCRC are in sharp contrast to much of the inherited tradition of schooling. For example, seeing young people as active, engaged participants with legitimate opinions and viewpoints can contrast uncomfortably with a model of schooling that was built on

assumptions of compliance and passivity. Thus, every school is faced with a particular challenge: how to reconcile, in its day-to-day operations, a human rights perspective, with inherited traditions and practices that may be authoritarian, disrespectful and oppressive? A thorough interrogation of the UNCRC, particularly Articles 3, 12, 29 and 42 should lead to revision and re-imagining of established policies and practices so that a cultural shift takes place so that all aspects of school life are directed towards the best interests of all enrolled children. The suggestion by Tibbits (2002) that key outcomes of human rights education include learners being informed about their rights, respectful of others' rights and encouraging students to take action to protect or promote the rights of others, offers an empowering framework. Assisting students to move from passive learners to ones with greater agency is a clear challenge to all educators. Striking a balance between individual student autonomy and a commitment to the common good is one of the main challenges for school leaders as well as individual classroom teachers. In working towards genuine balance, promoting empathy can be linked with the teaching of 'responsibility'.

Covell *et al.*'s account of a *Rights, Respect and Responsibility* initiative in Hampshire, England is instructive at a number of levels. Based on research in 13 schools, the evidence points to improved school ethos, the importance of committed leadership, a whole school approach and, notably, the impact of a changed school culture on local communities (Covell *et al.*, 2010). Overall, the Hampshire initiative provides a valuable model for schools and systems interested in pursuing children's rights education policy and practice. Such a vision sees schools as powerful moral forces closely connected with their communities and contributing positively to such communities.

CONCLUSION

Schooling is a deeply embedded tradition in modern societies. However, schools are often criticised as falling short of meeting contemporary needs

and many countries are currently pursuing a 'reform agenda'. The challenges schools face include boredom, absenteeism, bullying, alienation, schoolyard violence, self-harm, alcohol and other drug abuse, irresponsible sexual behaviour, and large gaps between the rhetoric of aspiration and the reality of practice. Responses to such challenges are sometimes piecemeal and disconnected from the powerful underlying thrust and values within the school. Initiatives such as education for citizenship, co-operative learning, teamwork, assessment for learning are more likely to take root if the whole school culture is coherently supportive of such initiatives. Recent decades have seen a rise in prominence of the language of 'human rights'. This chapter has proposed that the UNCRC offers schools a rich framework for school self-evaluation, for clarifying and re-energising their core mission, for giving renewed impetus to active teaching and learning strategies, for ethical leadership, for improved governance and for more grounded teacher education programmes. These assertions are made while recognising the tensions between an UNCRC inspired view of schooling and inherited traditions, mindsets and practices, especially those that are authoritarian.

Finally, in the context of educational change generally, Sugrue (2008: 223) identifies a necessity for new forms of engagement that are populated by "coalitions of the willing" rather than "the serried phalanx of the coerced". A shift towards re-imagined schools based on the UNCRC, can begin with like-minded colleagues discussing, recognising and applying some of the implications set out above.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Activity:

Put each article of the UNCRC on a separate card. You can use the formal language of the actual convention or, sometimes more effectively, the 'child-friendly' version produced by UNICEF. Invite participants (children, student-teachers, teachers, school leaders or others) in small groups (max 6) to select the articles which they consider to be most relevant to schooling. Each group shares its decisions and rationale with the rest of the class. Discussion and debate ensues. Colourful PowerPoint slides using the child-friendly version, printed 6 to a page, and then laminated can become a reusable resource.

Useful Background Source:

http://www.unicef.org/southafrica/SAF_resources_crcchildfriendly.pdf

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