Book Review


This is one of a series of books under the umbrella ‘Rethinking’ aspects of childhood. It is a gentle, persuasive and informative introduction to children's rights. Its approach is broadly Socratic. It is ideal as an introduction to the subject. I would hope that it is a book that will be read and studied, discussed and re-examined by young people and by those ‘in charge’ of them. Readers of this journal will appreciate the easy style of the book, the many examples given of theory, practice and research, and the clear presentation and insights it offers to those who teach the subject (and/or preach it). There is nothing particularly original in the book, and at times it is rather superficial.

The emphasis on the book is on the United Kingdom but there are examples galore drawn from the countries to show different approaches to children and their rights.

The key themes of the book are introduced in chapter 1: the rights dynamic, the emergence of a rights agenda, and rights-informed ways of relating to children. Chapter 2 deals with definitions and developments. This is a bit sloppy. J. S. Mill appears twice as Mills; the Geneva Declaration is wrongly dated (1924, not 1923) and it is called a Convention; the 1948 ‘additions’ were in 1959, the Convention as set out at pages 43 to 44 is over-simplified (for example the reference to ‘adults’ in Article 3; Article 26 paraphrased as ‘the rights to have enough money’). When the key points of the Convention are repeated on page 46, Article 3 is said to promote the best interests of the child as ‘the’ primary consideration, not ‘a’ primary consideration. This is corrected on page 47! We are also told that only Sweden has an explicit strategy for implementing the Convention, which is not true.

The next chapter – chapter 3 – is on tensions and debates in relation to children's rights. There is a most useful table (p. 65) on ‘critiques’ of the Convention, though the list is over-selective. There is a list of the ‘qualities’ of rights (p. 67), but surely rights ‘are’ necessities (as opposed to ‘luxuries’), not about necessities (I think Alderson is wrongly quoted). There are many qualities of rights missed (see Freeman, 2006). On the UK’s reservation as regards child migrants and asylum seekers, the book is now (happily) out of date. But was the reservation not withdrawn early enough for notice to have taken of it in the book?
Chapter 4 is on the child's voice. There is a striking table contrasting 'silence' and 'voice' on page 89 (one of the best things about this book are the helpful tables of contrasts). There is a little discussion of the relationship between voice and advocacy, but the importance of advocacy would be brought out more convincingly (and see Corbyn and Dalrymple, 2009). But, to be fair, Dalrymple's research is quoted. So is Flewitt's (2005). This was completely new to me. Flewitt looked at how three-year-old children use a range of voices in pre-school: they are 'multimodal' using talk, body language, facial expression and face. Any research which shows the ability of children as young as this to participate in decision-making is to be valued (see also Alderson, Killen and Hawthorne, 2005). The ‘Ask Us’ research is also particularly significant. The book includes an interview with Margaret Murray about this research. The instructional tools used by the authors of this book is the interview – it is not a common tool used but it is a helpful assistance to understanding the issues.

There follows a chapter on rights and decision-making. Including children in decision-making can be seen as valuable – to them and to society – but it can also be seen as a child's entitlement. Research is valuably drawn upon – which indicates this. Children are citizens and therefore holders of human rights, just as adults are. Examples are given of education, youth courts (Kilkelly's work is cited) and of Norwegian research. The authors argue correctly that participation is an organic process that can occur in different ways within different kinds of settings (see page 130): the image of a jigsaw is used cleverly to explain this.

Attention is then turned to rights and family life. Of course, it is the role of the state in family matters that is at the heart of opposition to ratification of the Convention in the USA (see Guggenheim, 2005 but now see also Woodhouse, 2008, and Fineman and Worthington, 2010). Jones and Welch offer a sound riposte to this way of thinking. The chapter covers issues like abuse and smacking, both all too briefly in my opinion. But the issues are clearly delineated. The juxtaposition of the Cleveland affair in the 1980s and the Climbié case most recently is appropriate, but I suspect too little is said to make the comparison understandable to those without knowledge of the two cases. Poverty, child labour and religion are also covered in this chapter.

The concluding chapter is on working with children. There are some poignant examples given, not least one drawn from Darfur (page 164). There is also an excellent table on page 168.

What I like about this book in particular is that it offers a roadmap – I suppose now a sat nav – to navigate towards the progress in raising the status of children that readers of this journal seek. And for those of us who are teachers, at whatever level it offers activities for those we guide, and is consumer-friendly. It also highlights the research which students should read, giving them enough to whet appetites, whilst hoping they will seek out more.