

## A REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH INTO EDUCATION BASED ON THE GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS OF CHILDREN IN STATE SCHOOLS IN HAMPSHIRE, ENGLAND

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In 2002 one of the county education officials in Hampshire, England learned of research carried out by researchers at Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia, Canada, into the effects of children's rights education which involved the consistent teaching and modelling in 'rights respecting classrooms' of what are generally referred to as the 'participation rights' set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC - [www.unicef.org/crc/](http://www.unicef.org/crc/)) (Covell & Howe, 1999; 2001; Covell, O'Leary & Howe, 2002; Howe & Covell, 1998). These early findings in Canada indicated that, compared with their peers, children who learn about their rights under the Convention, in a rights-consistent classroom, show 'increased levels of self-esteem, increased perceived peer and teacher support, a more adult-like understanding of rights and responsibilities, more supportive attitudes toward children of minority status, and more rights-respecting behaviours.' (Covell and Howe, 2007 and 2008 – available from [www3.hants.gov.uk/education/childrensrights/](http://www3.hants.gov.uk/education/childrensrights/))

In 2002 and 2003 administrators and a small group of interested infant, junior and primary head teachers from Hampshire County undertook study-leave in Cape Breton, Canada. Following these visits the Hampshire Education Authority's *Rights Respect and Responsibility* Initiative (RRR) was created. This involved a programme of whole school reform in some Hampshire schools which began with infant, junior and primary schools and later extended into a small number of secondary schools. The initiative, perhaps surprisingly, received the whole hearted support of key locally elected conservative party politicians and the current policy is that RRR should eventually involve all the county's schools at all age levels.

The UN agency responsible for monitoring the implementation of the UNCRC by signatory states (which include all the UN member states except for the USA and Somalia) is UNICEF. In 2004 UNICEF UK created a two level national award which proved appropriate for validating the efforts of RRR schools in Hampshire and which encouraged the creation of similar programmes in several other cities and counties in England. This is known as the Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) details of which can be found at [www.unicef.org/uk/rrsa](http://www.unicef.org/uk/rrsa)

In 2005 the Cape Breton researchers Covell and Howe agreed with Hampshire staff that they would carry out a 3 year longitudinal study from 2005 to 2008 on the effect of the RRR programme in 16 infant, junior and primary schools some of which they categorised as **fully implemented (FI)** schools and others as **less fully implemented (LFI)** schools (later changed to **PI** or **partially implemented**). They used a 1 to 8 scale for this school self evaluation with 1 representing 'not really started' and 8 indicating that children's rights were central to the overall functioning and ethos of the school, operationalised in every classroom and understood and supported by all staff. In 2005 at the start of the study school ratings ranged from 3.0 to 7.9. By the end of the second year in 2007 3 schools had dropped out and of the survivors 4 had reached level 8, 4 had lower scores than at the start, and the other 5 had made some improvement, one very considerably (3.00 to 7.67) and one only very marginally (4.40 to 4.50). The researchers attributed the drop-out, the improvements and the declines entirely to the relative commitment, planning, leadership and enthusiasm, or lack of it, of the individual school headteachers for the aims of the RRR project.

In 2006 a second study covering much of the same ground was initiated by UNICEF UK to evaluate the impact that their RRSA (Rights Respecting Schools Award) was having on participating schools. This was carried out by the Universities of Sussex and Brighton and resulted in a preliminary report in 2008 after one year of a 3 year longitudinal study and a final report in 2010 (Sebba and Robinson, 2008 and 2010 - [www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Education-Documents/RRSA\\_Evaluation\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Education-Documents/RRSA_Evaluation_Summary.pdf) ). The study collected data from 12 schools in 5 local authority areas, including Hampshire where in one or two schools data was also being collected at the same time by Covell and Howe causing some confusion in these schools according to the Cape Breton researchers! Strangely Sebba and Robinson make no reference to the work of Covell and Howe in their reports though surely they must have known of it.

Covell and Howe's findings are certainly interesting for those trying to implement more democratic approaches in state (or in the US 'public') schools and school systems. There is no space here to detail all the findings or the methodologies of the two Covell and Howe reports so I will quote their summary –

*'...we can confidently say that where RRR has been fully implemented, teachers and pupils are showing many benefits. Teachers are feeling less stressed and enjoying their classes more, and are able to see the positive effects on their pupils of the work they are doing. Pupils are aware of their rights, they respect the rights of others, they feel respected, and their levels of participation and engagement in school have increased. Schools in which RRR has been fully implemented emanate an atmosphere of mutual respect and harmonious functioning. They are clearly, in the words of the overarching principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in "the child's best interests." ' (Covell and Howe, 2010)*

Significantly the authors noted a qualitative difference in the understanding of the programme between children in the fully implemented or progressing schools and those where the school RRR rating was static or declining. In the former schools children had an understanding that rights were inalienable but need to be accompanied with growing responsibilities and respect for the rights of others whereas in the latter schools children saw the programme as mainly to do with rules and obedience to those rules.

One of Covell and Howe's findings is of particular interest to me and supports one of the guiding hypotheses of the study that I conducted for the UK government in 2001 into 'more than usually participative schools', a concept that substantially overlaps with that of a 'rights respecting school.' (Hannam, 2001 - [www.csveducation.org.uk/downloads/research-and-reports/Impact-of-Citizenship-Education-Report.pdf](http://www.csveducation.org.uk/downloads/research-and-reports/Impact-of-Citizenship-Education-Report.pdf) ) This involves

*'... the possibility that the positive effects of RRR are the most pronounced in the schools which are in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. In such schools, absences and behavioral incidents have decreased markedly; and test scores, motivation, and self-regulation in learning and behavior, and parental involvement have increased significantly. Pupils' behaviour, academic motivation, and achievement test scores have shown remarkable improvement. It would appear that the rights education program has altered the educational experiences, and in turn, the motivations and aspirations of the pupils.*

*Pupils living in adverse family circumstances, through RRR, are perhaps for the first time experiencing respect, success, and hope for their futures. In the words of one pupil, "It (RRR) gives you self-encouragement knowing that you have rights and someone cares about it." There is reason to believe that RRR may in fact function as a protective factor in promoting educational resilience among children living in adversity.'*

Sebba and Robinson's findings are similarly positive and a selection are set out below under the six headings required by the UNICEF UK commissioning brief which are themselves based on the six headings used for evaluating schools for the RRSA.

1. **Knowledge and understanding of the CRC.** This developed well in most, though not all, of the studied schools and gradually became a 'way of being' in some rather than a list of rights to be learned one by one. Responsibility developed parallel to the growing understanding of rights. Some schools had difficulty in taking along ancillary staff such as playground supervisors. As with Covell and Howe, Sebba and Robinson found the attitude and commitment of head teachers to be crucial to the successful implementation of the project.
2. **Relationships and Behaviour.** The study schools reported improvements in relationships between students, between staff, and between students and staff. Where conflicts between students did occur students became more able to resolve these for themselves.
3. **Pupils feel empowered to respect the environment and rights of others locally, nationally and globally.** Awareness of international issues and campaigns grew though understanding of national and local issues was less well developed.
4. **Pupils demonstrate positive attitudes towards inclusivity and diversity within society.** Positive change in attitudes towards ethnic minorities and disabilities of all kinds was reported in all the study schools over the 3 years of the study.
5. **Pupils actively participate in decision-making within the school community.** Although there was progress on this issue within all the study schools there were still examples of adults making decisions for students that they were perfectly capable of making for themselves. Much of the decision making allowed to many school student representative bodies such as student councils was still restricted to issues such as toilet cleanliness rather than curriculum design or other core purposes of the schools, though there were examples where this was not the case. On the whole progress was better than the average for English schools as a whole reported in a major review of student involvement in school decision making in England carried out in 2007 by Whitty and Wisby (2007). (Whitty and Wisby's review is available on-line and makes reference to several studies in which I have been involved. I can provide copies to anyone interested.)
6. **Pupils show improved learning and standards.** Aside from begging the question of 'standards of what?' students and staff in the study schools reported that the rights respecting approach created a classroom climate that was 'more conducive to learning.' Scores on standardised tests improved in a majority of the study schools and exclusions and suspensions for anti-social behaviour declined in most during the 3 years of the study. There are always so many variables at work in educational research that causal connections can rarely be demonstrated but the associations are nonetheless interesting and match those in my own 2001 study. Also consistent with the findings of Covell and Howe and my own work was the finding that the shift to higher test scores and less anti-social behaviour

appeared to be greatest in schools in poor socio-economic areas. *'RRSA may mediate the influence of poor socio-economic circumstances on outcomes.'*

Both studies presume that there are no ambiguities within the overriding requirement of the UNCRC that the 'best interests' of the child should always be the yardstick for its interpretation and implementation. Neither study explores the fundamental contradiction that I would certainly have felt as a child in a 'rights respecting' school between on the one hand my "...right...to education...compulsory and free to all" (article 28) if it was experienced as subjection to testing that damaged my self confidence and self-esteem, being grouped by 'ability' in a way that labelled me as 'bright and gifted' or 'being a slow learner', being coerced into lessons where I must 'attend' to a compulsory curriculum much of which I find to be uninteresting or irrelevant and on the other hand my participation rights set out in the Covention. Namely my "...right to express (my) views freely in all matters affecting the child...the views...being given due weight..." (article 12), my "right to freedom of expression...to seek, receive and impart information of all kinds..." (article 13), my "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion..." (article 14), my "right to freedom of association and freedom of peaceful assembly.." (article 15), my right not to be "...subjected to arbitrary interference with...privacy..." (article 16), and my right to be protected "...from all forms of physical or mental violence..." (article 19).

There are moves to introduce Matthew Lipmann's Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme into Hampshire schools. Perhaps this will provide the students and the teachers with the analytical and critical tools to make sense, or not, of these contradictions in the UNCRC and the RRR programme?

As a teacher in state schools for many years I see the RRR programme and the RRSA accreditation as steps towards a more humane school system. Educators in democratic schools might have other views of course.

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