

Book Review

Education in the Best Interests of the Child: A Children's Rights Perspective on Closing the Achievement Gap

R. Brian Howe and Katherine Covell
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In 1914, Ernest Hoag and Lewis Terman claimed that the provision of medical services in schools was “less a question of parental responsibility than of children’s rights” (p. 120). Theirs was one of many arguments for the primacy of children’s welfare in education policy, but as Howe and Covell demonstrate, education in the developed world still is not based on this principle. Indeed, they argue that “underachievement, disengagement, and inequality of opportunity” are extensive problems precisely because education does not occur in the best interests of the child, an approach that is central to the laws and policies governing custody, child labor, health care, and other areas affecting children’s well-being.

This argument for educational improvement through social justice provides a thorough refutation of the “heroic action” policies advocated recently (and perhaps most visibly) in the documentary, *Waiting for ‘Superman’* (2010). According to Howe and Covell, the process of education reform is not a pitched battle between plucky crusaders and the bad teachers, implacable unions, and indifferent administrators who oppose them, but neither is it based on impassioned teachers who can inspire even the most disadvantaged kids under any circumstances dramatized in such films as *Freedom Writers* (2007) and *Dangerous Minds* (1995). Such portrayals make for compelling stories but poor policies, and films like *Entre les Murs* (2008) remind us that the complex interactions of children, teachers, and administrators too often take place in a school environment defined by deep socio-economic inequities and substantial cultural divides. *Education in the Best Interests of the Child* is an argument not for heroic efforts but for socio-political change, for structural reform rather than individual action.

Like others who see the achievement gap as a problem of political economy, Howe and Covell do not suggest that education reform alone is sufficient to close it. But neither do they conclude, as some education scholars have, that “the adversities associated with being reared in poverty are simply too great for schools to overcome” (p. 192). Rather, they suggest that “it perhaps is not a question of whether schools can close the achievement gap, but one of how families and communities can support schools in closing the achievement gap” (p. 193), something that requires both education reform and improved social and economic support for disadvantaged families and communities. The challenge is not in effecting ideological change but in building the political will to enact the equality of opportunity that most societies in the developed world already embrace in principle.

Howe and Covell begin with an analysis of the best interests principle, as articulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the challenges of implementing it in education, especially the inequality of opportunity. They then suggest three broad areas of reform: the inclusion of preschool programming in formal education; the improvement of classroom and school practices, including training and recruiting high-quality teachers and administrators; and the modification of school cultures and climates to make education consistent with the basic rights and interests of children. Some of their recommendations, many of which will be familiar to those who work on education policy, are quite modest. For example, they propose that systems of teacher training should focus less on subject competency and more on pedagogical development and classroom management. Others, such as lowering the age at which most children begin school from five years to three, are far more radical. They conclude by exploring the extent to which education reform alone can address the achievement gap.

Education in the Best Interests of the Child is clearly written, passionate, and highly accessible. A wide range of readers, from education researchers and policy analysts to parents and teachers, will find it useful and engaging. Howe and Covell's review of the literature is thorough and they make a compelling case for the need to align research on teaching and learning more closely with policy and practice. Their argument for structural change is a welcome (if not uncommon) antidote to the teacher bashing and charter school worship that are so often present in calls for education reform, but their policy recommendations as a whole are a bit of a mixed bag. Many of their recommendations are clear and offer a chance for parents, teachers, and administrators to make immediate changes. Taking steps to improve the culture and climate of schools and classrooms, helping students understand their rights, and promoting new leadership styles are intelligible and achievable goals. Others, such as establishing early childhood education programs or providing social support for poor families or communities, would require the kind of political will, orchestrated efforts, and financial investment that are unrealistic in most of the countries Howe and Covell discuss. Indeed, the argument for ensuring equality of opportunity, though laudable, is predicated on a significant redistribution of resources, something that is unrealistic given the social climates and asymmetric distribution of political power in most nations.

As schools slowly begin to abandon the industrial model, which changed little over the last 150 years, it is not clear what the new model(s) for education will be. Clearly, computer-based learning interventions and digital communications technologies will play an ever more significant role in future education practices, but Howe and Covell's work makes clear that the achievement gap will only grow if education policy fails to account for issues of socio-economic disadvantage, negative school cultures, and other risk amplifiers as schools evolve to meet the needs of 21st-century education.

References

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