

# Empowering children

*“States shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views 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.”* – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

*“You may not be ready for this, but your kids are going to love it”* – Michael J. Fox, ‘Back to the Future’

A couple of months before the last election, I had a chat with a Labour MP who had just been to visit a primary school. I asked what he had said to them.

“I talked to them about democracy and subversion”, he explained proudly. He’d started off by asking them to imagine that all the teachers had disappeared, and that they had to make all the rules and take all the decisions. He got them to think and talk about how they would decide what to do, how they would make sure that everyone had the chance to have their say, how they would choose their representatives and so on. Needless to say, the children really enjoyed it and learned a lot.

From time to time, there is a debate about whether people should be allowed to vote at the age of 16 or 18 (or for the really hard-core reactionaries, whether the age should be put back up to 21). But it doesn’t really matter which age people notionally get the vote at if they don’t believe that voting will make any difference, as is the case for most people under the age of at least 30. To teach people about the importance of democracy, we need to start much, much earlier.

One place to start, as the anecdote above suggests, is in schools. Citizenship classes at the age of 14 serve a particular purpose in helping to explain about features of our political system, but every child, from the time that they first start school, should have the opportunity to have their say about how things are done. This doesn’t mean that they would always get their way, but it does mean that their ideas get listened to and respected.

It is, after all, the case that there are many aspects of school life on which children bring particular expert knowledge. An anti-bullying strategy drawn up solely by adults, for example, is less likely to be an effective one than one which is developed by children talking about how they are affected by bullying, the different kinds of bullying that goes on in and out of school and where every child knows that the rules are ones which they have had an input into. Even where children do not have expert knowledge, their views can still be important – in finding out how best to conduct tests or what good or bad ways of teaching are.

But while schools are one good example, there are many others. There are thousands and thousands of parks and play areas across Britain, which are intended for use by children. Yet when decisions are taken about these play areas – whether to keep them open, what equipment to put in them, how to improve safety - it is extremely rare that any effort is made to find out the views of the children that use them.

When children are involved in the decision-making process about play areas, the results are extremely positive – children are more likely to use the play areas and to enjoy doing so, and also when they are a few years older, they are less likely to vandalise what they see as ‘their’ play areas. It is simple common sense that rather than having decisions taken by

council officers, who may not live in the area and certainly wouldn't be using the equipment, that it should be the users who make the decisions.

There are other examples across the public services where a better service would be provided if services were geared towards the needs and wants of children. The difference is obvious whenever you go to visit a clinic, play in a park, go to a playscheme, travel on a bus or anywhere else where a real effort has been made to find out what would make for a safe and welcoming environment for children. Nor is it that difficult to find out what children want – it may take a little time and effort, and involve different ways of consulting people from the standard ones, but talking about these things in school lessons or at playgroup, getting children to do drawings of what they'd like to see in a playground, and using all the different imaginative ways of consulting people that are used by everyone from local councils to advertising agencies would give a good idea about what was needed. There is the need to explain things clearly, and always the risk of tantrums if decisions don't go the way that some people hope, but anyone who's seen a local planning committee at work or watched a debate at the House of Commons will know that these are hardly problems unknown when trying to involve adults in decision-making.

Research done by the Oxfordshire Early Years Partnership, looking at how playgroups have involved children in helping to draw up the rules which govern the playgroup, have shown that if there is a real commitment then even very little children and children with learning disabilities can be included in making decisions about what should and should not be done. There are plenty of examples all over the country of play areas in run down areas which are now well used and of children who are happy and successful at school because the teachers value and listen to them, but there are also many more examples of missed opportunities and of children who grow up never having had the chance to have a meaningful say in any of the decisions which affect their lives.

Issues affecting children and young people are often treated as of secondary importance, interesting enough in their way, but not as important as 'proper' issues like the economic case for the Euro or electoral reform or Iraq and foreign policy or any of those issues which tend to dominate political discussion. But in fact genuinely involving children in decision-making is one of the most radical and subversive changes that could be made.

Someone who from a very early age is used to being involved in making decisions about how to improve their local area and how to improve the services that they use is much more likely to participate in our democratic system, and to see the point of collective action to solve the problems that we all face. One of the many poverty traps in our society is that people who already have a lot of wealth and power are also those who are most likely to raise their voices when they want something to be changed, whereas many people who have never had much control over the decisions which affect them put up with some of the most appalling conditions without complaining or trying to get things changed.

As well as being the right thing to do to help children, tackling child poverty is important because it helps to tackle the poverty which affects their parents. Many parents acquire skills for the first time when they learn to read at the same time as their children, or get a job working because they are able to get affordable childcare and information about courses at the children's centre. In a similar way, parents who have never had much control over their own lives and who are disengaged from the democratic process would hear from their children about how they helped decide what the rules were at their playgroup or school or see how the local council put in new equipment to the local play area because the children that used it asked for it. This would have a knock-on effect – if schools involve their children in making decisions, then why not employers involving

their employees in making decisions in the workplace. If three and four year olds can have good ideas about how to improve council services, then surely the same is true for everyone else. And if better decisions are made when everyone gets involved and has their say, why are so many decisions taken by a small group of privileged people?

The Labour Party was set up to give a voice to people whose views were being ignored by the elites, and one of Labour's best achievements since 1997 has been to push up the political agenda the issue of child poverty and the duty of government to take action to reduce and eliminate it. The tax credits and Sure Start were bright new initiatives which have made a significant impact in reducing the levels of child poverty (which in 1997 were the highest in Europe). What is becoming clear, though, is that existing measures will not be enough to meet the target of eliminating child poverty in Britain within a generation, and inequalities of wealth and power are still as great as they have ever been. If people are allowed and encouraged to get involved in making democratic decisions from an early age, and find themselves working together with others to agree on what to do to improve things, then they won't put up with all the unfairness and inequality that we see in Britain today, and they will make sure that future generations have all the rights which at the moment only a minority can take for granted. Best of all, it's one of those measures which would be denounced today as 'political correctness gone mad', and which in a few years time would be completely uncontroversial and accepted by everyone as a more intelligent way of organising our society.