Children’s Rights, Wellbeing and Social Justice

Moray House School of Education Election Briefings

Education from early years to 18
Research and Practice Contributing to Policy

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Children have a right to experience an equal and equitable start to their lives. The current children’s rights and wellbeing frameworks in Scotland need to better recognise the diversity of experiences of groups of children and young people. In particular, there is a need for greater recognition and action on how intersectional discrimination and inequalities impact on wellbeing and prevent children from participating and learning effectively.

Key points for consideration

- Children have a right to an equal and equitable start to their lives, and to participate in decisions that affect them.
- Currently, the realisation of children’s rights is impeded by structural barriers and discrimination, a piecemeal approach to children’s rights and an apolitical wellbeing framework in Scottish legislation.
- Meaningful and sustainable childhood solutions require participatory, collaborative, intersectional and creative approaches in policy and professional training, complemented by wider policy initiatives that address and remove structural barriers and inequalities.

Briefing

Children and young people identify their top four important children’s rights issues as:

- being safe and secure,
- being treated fairly,
- being respected, and
- being included (SCCYP, 2010).

To achieve this, a diverse range of structural, cultural and individual barriers to learning need to be removed (Davis et al., 2014a). The fundamental causes of inequity in childhood are poverty, discrimination and disempowerment. Children, young people and families that have financial security, are more integrated into their communities, and more engaged in their own learning require less professional intervention.

In Scotland, policies such as the Birth To Three Curriculum, Curriculum For Excellence, Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 and Getting It Right For Every Child, if implemented collaboratively – not as ‘top down’ performance requirements but with the active participation of children and adults in a community – can remove barriers to children’s learning (Davis and Smith, 2012).

To prevent young people from encountering discrimination and barriers to learning in schools, out-of-school clubs, early years settings and communities, Scotland requires:

- a more integrated approach to children’s rights,
- attention to deep social and economic inequalities of Scottish society,
• a wellbeing framework that goes beyond an aspirational notion of wellbeing and instead uses more politically hard edged concepts such as rights and social justice. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 does not address the wider political context of wellbeing such as children’s status in society, adult arbitrary use of power, unequal distribution of resources and fair access to legal representation, and
• strong legislation to hold local authorities and other public, private and third sector organisations to account and with more substantive obligations to implement children’s rights than currently in place (Tisdall and Davis, 2015, Davis et al., 2014a).

These requirements can be met through participatory, collaborative, intersectional and creative approaches in childhood policy and professional training.

**Participation and collaboration**

Research shows that childhood solutions require a multi-layered approach. For example, in the case of disabled children and parents successful transition (between services and settings) is associated with organisations that

• adopt a child-inclusive ethos,
• enable children’s autonomy,
• foster participation,
• involve parents,
• use early collaborative planning, and
• regularly evaluate outcomes.

Professionals suggest that experience of working through issues of transition, organisational values and characteristics and ongoing professional training are also important factors (Davis et al., 2014b).

**Intersectionality**

Intersectional approaches are important for understanding the complexity of children and young people’s experiences of inequalities. Intersectionality, a concept developed by Black Feminist scholars in the US, has been defined by young people involved in a knowledge exchange project in the following way:

‘Intersectionality is used to describe how people are treated because of their sexuality, age, race, disability, class, [gender] and how [these structural aspects] connect and stop people from doing the things that they want to do in life.’

This means that policy makers and practitioners need to

• recognise the diversity of experiences among seemingly ‘homogenous’ groups of children and young people,
• examine critically which children count in mainstream practices and campaigns (and which children are left out), and
• build alliances across different groups of professionals and stakeholders (Konstantoni et al. 2014, Kustatscher 2016).

**Creativity, equity and pedagogy**

Creative pedagogy means adults should be facilitators of children’s learning, and that children require a certain degree of freedom to be involved with activities of their choice (as advocated in our Froebel continuing professional development course) (Davis et al., 2012). Research demonstrates that qualifications that advocate rights-based and anti-discriminatory practice support early years and out of school professionals to develop creative and outdoor approaches to learning. Professional qualifications (e.g. the BA Childhood Practice) also have immediate benefits for the way children develop relationships and long-term benefits for how children achieve at school (Davis et al., 2014c).
Conclusions
Children, young people, adults and communities need to be engaged as partners in the design and delivery of services and educational experiences. Policy makers and training providers need to promote participatory (rather than top-down), collaborative, interdisciplinary, intersectional and creative approaches. These approaches need to be complemented by wider policy initiatives that address and remove structural barriers and inequalities.

References


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