

## **Developing mutually respectful adult-child relationships in schools: is this a reality experienced equally by all pupils?**

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### **Acknowledging children's rights: a legal requirement**

The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) of 1950 set out core civic rights and freedoms for children and young people. These rights were enshrined in UK law through the Human Rights Act of 1988. This was followed in 1989 by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which provided additional protection for the rights and freedoms of children; the UK government ratified the UNCRC in 1991. Together these conventions provide for the rights and freedoms of children and young people, and affirm that children are equally legitimate holders of human rights as adults.

Recent educational policy documentation within England makes specific reference to the rights of children within the UNCRC (1989). For example, in 2008, guidance from the Department for Children, Schools and Families, (DCSF) *'Working together: Listening to the voices of children and young people'* asserted that schools have a duty to promote children's and young people's well-being, and that this requirement is underpinned by the UNCRC (DCSF, 2008; 3). It is also clearly stated that there is an expectation for schools to ensure the views of children and young people are *'heard and valued in the taking of decisions which affect them, and that they are supported in making a positive contribution to their school and local community'* (*Ibid*: 5). More recently, the Department for Education (DfE, 2014) issued statutory guidance, *'Listening to and involving children and young people'*, in which schools are strongly encouraged to pay due regard to the UNCRC. Within the guidance, it is stated: *'This legislation is underpinned by the general principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ...in particular, article 12...'*. Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) gives children and young people the right to express their views in all matters affecting them, and for these views to be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. Within this and other Articles of the UNCRC, there is an inherent expectation that respect will be shown towards children and young people, however, the embedding of these Articles into educational policy documents is no guarantee that they will be translated into practices grounded in demonstrating respect for pupils; it is the manner in which these rights are interpreted and upheld that is of significance.

### **A drive to developing a rights-respecting school ethos**

There has been a purposeful and determined drive by UNICEF UK to promote knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC within schools, and to build rights-respecting school communities through the development of their Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA). The RRSA seeks to put the UNCRC at the heart of a school's ethos; it helps schools to use the UNCRC as their values framework, and specifically teaches pupils about their rights and their responsibilities to respect the rights of others (Sebba and Robinson, 2010). RRSA was introduced in 2004; there are now over 3,200 primary, secondary and

special schools in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales registered for the award. A three-year evaluation of UNCEF's UK's Rights-Respecting Schools approach found that where schools were actively working towards RRSA, pupils and staff reported changes in their school's ethos, with staff and pupils demonstrating relatively higher levels of respect, understanding and tolerance for each other than had previously been the case (*Ibid.*). In particular, pupils and staff reported improved relationships and behavior since the introduction of RRSA. They considered this was largely attributable to pupils having an increased knowledge of their own and other people's rights, and an improved understanding by pupils and staff of their responsibilities to respect the rights of others. Where schools were working towards RRSA, staff and pupils adopted a rights-respecting language; fundamental to this was an expectation that all members of the school community would communicate with each other in a respectful way. Once embedded in a school, a rights-respecting language equipped pupils and staff with the capacity to adopt a mutually respectful and tolerant approach when talking about potentially conflicting issues (*Ibid:* 20). Schools working towards RRSA also introduced more opportunities for staff and pupils to share and listen to each other's views.

It is a moral prerequisite that children should be respected, and the establishment of a rights-respecting school ethos is a positive move in working towards this. We need to proceed with some caution, however, and look critically beyond the initial wholly positive outcomes to which the development of a rights-respecting school community alludes, to ensure a respectful school ethos is a reality experienced equally by all pupils in all areas of school life.

### **Cautions around developing mutually respectful adult-pupil relationships**

Two broad concerns emerge in relation to the reality of developing mutually respectful adult-pupil relationships. Firstly, findings from the research suggested that in most cases, when decisions about school-related issues were made by pupils, these focused on issues which, although were of importance to the pupils themselves, tended not to be of central importance to school policies and practices (Sebba and Robinson, 2010, 40). This raises ethical concerns about the extent to which central issues of school practice and policy are genuinely open for debate. It gives rise to concerns about whether seemingly mutually respectful adult-pupil relationships allow for the genuine involvement of pupils in all areas of school life. While on the surface, relationships may appear to be mutually respectful, the micro-processes at play within schools can work to position pupils as relatively 'powerless' when compared to the adults in schools, with pupils internalising unstated assumptions that certain aspects of school organisation, policies and practices are not open to be challenged by them.

A second concern relates to whether the voices of all pupils are listened to and respected equally. The issue here is whether those who possess the schools' cultural capital and agree with what the adults in the school want to hear are acknowledged more often, and listened to in a more respectful way, than those whose views are counter to the values to which the school espouses.

The reality of mutually respectful adult-pupils relationships may, therefore, not be as prevalent as first assumed. If such relationships are to become a reality in schools, there needs to be situations in which a multiplicity of voices, including those considered to be conflicting, are listened to and respected in equal measure to the more popular, conformist voices. The adults involved need to trust pupils' competencies and their abilities to offer insightful comments about a wide range of school-related issues, and to give serious consideration to the procedures around selecting whose voices are listened to, acknowledged and respected. Consideration also needs to be given to Initial Teacher Education programmes, to ensure that those entering the profession appreciate the principles of the UNCRC, and are able to think critically about how to promote this work and establish relationships grounded in mutual respect, with all pupils in schools.

### **References**

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