

Connections: Active Citizenship and Multiple Identities.

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Young People and Civil Society : Lessons from a Case Study of
Active Learning for Active Citizenship.

By

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Introduction

This paper is based upon a three-year action-research evaluation of *Investing in Children*, a human rights and citizenship project in County Durham, a large semi-rural local authority in the north east of England. The project was set up to promote the human rights of young people and enable them to give expression to their citizenship.

The work done was based on the premise that it is only young people themselves who can convincingly describe the realities of their status and experience as citizens. The young people who were part of the project reported here were helped to become researchers to find answers to their own questions, explore their own needs and interests and articulate these in ways that would influence key constituencies of adults and decision-makers. It began as a project initiated by senior, public sector managers. It developed, as those involved had hoped, into one owned by young people themselves.

The argument set out here is that the structural position occupied by young people in this society denies them opportunities to participate as citizens. This view has major implications for current debates in the United Kingdom about citizenship and the kinds of educational interventions that would support it. The outcomes of this young people-led research highlight that *political agency* among young people is constrained more by their powerlessness in various settings of their lives than by their ignorance of politics. It follows therefore that if opportunities to engage in and shape the decisions that affect their lives are improved, their knowledge and skills and citizens will develop and grow. Learning citizenship is inseparable from the practice of it.

In 1995, a group of senior managers from public and voluntary organisations formed a working party to discuss issues concerning the provision of services to children, young people and their families in County Durham.

Key individuals in the group were concerned about the negative stereotypes of children and young people being promoted in the media at this time, and the effect this was having upon children and young people themselves (Shenton 1999). Their intention was clearly to initiate a new debate, albeit within the narrow confines of local authority policy and services, about our attitude to children and young people. They were seeking to challenge the way we think about children and young people, and to engineer a change in the status of children and young people in society.

The outcome of their deliberations was the adoption of a set of values and principles, based upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. They produced the following Statement of Intent:

Our aim is to work in partnership with children and young people to promote their best interests and enhance their quality of life.

We will achieve this by:

- ***Consulting with children, young people and their families about decisions affecting their lives and the development of services;***
- ***Promoting partnerships between individuals and agencies to address young people's issues;***
- ***Developing accessible children and young people and family-centred services that promote dignity and independence and which do not discriminate or stigmatise;***
- ***Ensuring that, when making decisions on policies and services, consideration is given to their potential impact on the lives of children and young people.***

The values that underpin our work with children and young people are consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children Act 1989.

In 1997 the working party established a project, *Investing in Children*. The purpose of the project was to explore and address some of the issues thrown up by the adoption of these principles and values. The realisation of the vision of the Convention as described above would require a radical change in the way we think about children, and in the way children and young people are treated, particularly by the key institutions concerned with them.

Investing in Children has been and continues to be an experimental initiative within the field of children's rights. The purpose of this paper is to critically examine the potential for social change provided by the children's rights perspective, and its limitations. By this we mean the extent to which this perspective affords an effective means to analyse the current status of children and young people in society, and to develop an emancipatory discourse, one which "opens new visions and alternative futures" (Gergen, 1994, p63).

Children and young people occupy an ambiguous position within society. They are seen as innocent and vulnerable and in need of adult care and attention, and at the same time dangerous and unpredictable and in need of adult control and discipline. They are simultaneously regarded as the focus of adult aspirations for the future, to be nourished and protected, and as a threat to the current order, to be feared and suppressed. (Brown 1998, Jenks 1996, Rogers 2001). Brown notes that children are "constructed through policy not as citizens, but as increasingly repressive modes of governance. As adult anxiety and punitive desire escalate, the (metaphorical) body of the delinquent is carved up to serve popular appetites, and effectiveness and rationality are increasingly subsumed under ideological imperative". (Brown, 1998, p116). It is part of the argument being advanced in this papers that whilst children and young people remain politically voiceless and powerless, they will always be at the mercy of changes in political vogue.

At the heart of *Investing in Children* is the belief that the dominant discourse on childhood condemns them to a peculiarly vulnerable position within society. The representation of children and young people as objects of adult concern, or works in progress, or naturally unruly and in need of control and socialisation, but never as competent agents and citizens with rights confines them to a state of impotency and at the mercy of adults, some of whose commitment to their welfare, as history sadly teaches us, cannot always be relied upon. The refusal to accept that children and young people are credible witnesses to their own lives has often meant that society has been deaf to their complaints of injustice and their cries of pain.

Evidence from *Investing in Children* clearly demonstrates that this state of affairs is not inevitable, and that, given the opportunity, children and young people are knowledgeable about the world in which they live, and can be powerful participants in political dialogue and persuasive advocates on their own behalf.

This evidence represents at least a challenge to the dominant adult perception of the nature of childhood. It is part of the argument being advanced in this paper, that, as Brown and others have argued, the absence of the authentic voice of children themselves in the public discourse about childhood is one of the main reasons why they occupy such a marginal and vulnerable position within society. (Brown, 1998) .

Citizenship

Throughout the UK and also elsewhere, there has been a growing debate about young people and citizenship. As with other developments, this debate was not entirely in response to a concern about how children and young people were experiencing childhood, but more to do with anxieties about the future of adult institutions. There was evidence that the political system was falling into disrepute, especially amongst young people. A study by the British Youth Council in 1993 found that a fifth of eligible young people (under 25) were not registered to vote, a figure which was four times higher than in any other age group. (Hackett,1997, p81) Research by Professor Ivor Crewe in 1996 revealed that a large proportion (80%) of British students showed no interest in politics A Demos report commented: “in effect...an entire generation has opted out of politics” (Lansdown, 1999, p9)

The Government’s response to this was the creation of the Citizenship Advisory Group, chaired by Sir Bernard Crick. In 1998, in its final report, the group recommended that citizenship should be included as a statutory requirement in the National Curriculum. (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998) The underlying rationale for this was that the political apathy displayed by young people was largely a consequence of their ignorance of how the democratic system worked. Teaching citizenship in schools would equip young people with ‘political literacy’.

There is little doubt that knowledge is an important prerequisite for participation in political processes. However, it is at least questionable that a lack of technical knowledge of the current political system is sufficient to explain the lack of interest shown by young people. Other commentators suggest that it is the perception that the system is at best irrelevant to children and young people, and often prepared to sacrifice their interests on the altar of political expediency which is at the heart of the problem. Hackett asks whether the reluctance of young people to vote is “ a rational response to the negative impact of party and constitutional politics on the lives of young people?” and goes on to observe: “It is perhaps no coincidence that non-voting is also high in the poorest sections of our population who have also been marginalized by social policy.” (Hackett, 1998, p81)

Investing in Children proposes that the key question is the extent to which children and young people are afforded the opportunity to exercise their political rights, and that this has an impact upon the extent to which their civil and social rights are recognised. Citizens in possession of the political rights of citizenship can make their voices heard; they are able to access systems and structures through which decisions affecting the community are made; their opinions are recognised as legitimate and relevant. (Cairns, 2002, p1)

It is ironic that the school is the location in which the narrow conception of citizenship will be taught, as it is probably the institution in the lives of most children and young people, where their rights as citizens are so obviously ignored. As Jeffs suggests “No institution impinges upon the daily lives of children more than schools, and none is more contemptuous of their opinions or the concept of democracy.” (As quoted in Alderson, 1999, p200)

Schools are particularly focused upon the task of producing competent, productive citizens when they reach adulthood. The result is a system which is almost completely reliant upon the authority of adults. As Illich observes: “ Only by segregating human beings into the category of childhood could we ever get them to submit to the authority of the schoolteacher.” (Illich, 1973, p35) Alderson notes the particular irony of this situation: “...children are expected to show unquestioning obedience and loyalty, and physical and mental submission to their parents and teachers. Yet...these qualities are not only atypical of all other human relationships, they contradict the liberal qualities adults prize and demonstrate in their own lives.” (Alderson, 2000, p186)

Included in the Crick recommendations was the suggestion that schools should consider creating opportunities for greater student participation, but as Lansdown points out, the Report failed to make such measures mandatory, and the suggestion was not in any sense a recognition of the right of children and young people to be involved in the governing of schools, but rather because it would be provide useful experience for when they could take their place as responsible adult citizens. (Lansdown, 1999, p9)

Where schools do attempt to create some opportunities for the student's voice to be heard, the most common approach is through the creation of school councils. However, this approach has not been entirely successful. Young people in County Durham who have worked with *Investing in Children* are not entirely convinced that the school council is an effective vehicle to influence school policy (although it must be noted that there are some honourable exceptions to this). Most are dependent for their existence upon the commitment of individual members of the school staff, and students report that the same items can be discussed year after year, without significant action being taken. In a study conducted by Priscilla Alderson, only 19% of the students who responded believed that school councils had a positive effect upon the school. Equally, but for presumably different reasons, some staff voiced reservations about their value: "Some teachers told us that school councils were not useful because pupils want to talk only about uniform *and other forbidden questions*"(my emphasis) (Alderson, 2000, p132) In a similar, more recent study, Wyse reports the view of one young councillor: "the most choice we ever get is which felt pen to use" (Wyse, 2001, p217)

Alderson concludes her study with the following comment: "The survey suggests that schools cannot simply ignore democracy; they either promote democratic practices or actively contravene them, there is no neutral ground...It is illogical to expect students to understand lessons about rights and democracy, and at the same time not to realise that their rights are disrespected at school, or not to be sceptical about discrepancies between what teachers practice and preach." (p132)

If we move outside of the narrow environs of the school, there are indications that, for example, the conclusion of a study by Demos that "an entire generation has opted out of politics" (As quoted in Lansdown, 1999, p9) is unduly pessimistic. In a study in Nottinghamshire in 1998, the researchers identified a group of young people with "an interest in political issues if not the formal institutions associated with them." (Wring, Henna and Weinstein, 1998, p28)

This has without doubt been the experience of *Investing in Children*, and it again throws into sharp relief the limitations of the current debate on citizenship. It has been our experience that children and young people across a wide age range, from a wide variety of backgrounds and circumstances, are prepared to engage in what we would describe as political activity, provided that they have a reasonable hope of *achieving change*. What the Demos study and others would seem to reflect is a lack of confidence in the formal political processes, but it would be wrong to conclude that this equates with political apathy.

We would suggest that the work of *Investing in Children* provides evidence to support the view that children and young people are as willing to engage in a process which we would describe as active citizenship as any other group in society. Since 1997, an estimated 4000 young people have been involved with the project in over 150 different pieces of work. The following case studies, drawn from the *Investing in Children* Archive, illustrate both the potential of the *Investing in Children* approach to achieve change, and some of the factors inherent in the today's society which act as disincentive to children and young people exercising their citizenship rights.

Case Studies

The Transport Group

Without doubt, a key learning experience for *Investing in Children* was the work of the *Investing in Children* Transport Group. The lessons learned from the young people in this project have informed much of the subsequent development of *Investing in Children*, and it is worth analysing these in some detail.

In the early days of the project, efforts were made to engage with as many children and young people as possible about their views about issues of most importance to them. The issue which appeared most often in conversations with children and young people was transport. It therefore seemed like a reasonable next step to bring together some of the young people who had raised this issue. This became the *Investing in Children* Transport Group.

The group consisted of ten young women and two young men, aged between 14 and 16 years, drawn from three different parts of the County. The group had a variety of skills and abilities and there was a considerable variation in social and family circumstances.

The issues for the group at the start were fairly straightforward. The public and school transport system in the County did not appear to them to serve their needs, it was too expensive, and transport staff were often disrespectful. Importantly, their opinions were derived from their own experiences.

After considerable debate, the group decided that a starting point would be to get all of the relevant transport decision-makers together. The group would then explain the ways in which public transport was failing young people, and from the subsequent discussion solutions would be found. A meeting with transport professionals was duly arranged.

The meeting was very disappointing and there was very little engagement on the serious nature of the issues raised by the young people. Most of the time was taken up by the professionals providing a rationale in support of the status quo. The next part of the Transport Group's analysis was the trigger to a process from which *Investing in Children* was to learn a great deal. The young people commented: "We realised that information was power and for us to take part in the debate about transport in County Durham we needed, not only to talk about our own experiences, but also to have information about how transport was arranged elsewhere." (Card and others. 1999, p3)

Far from being disheartened by their experience at County Hall, the group resolved to gather information about transport which might allow them to challenge the experts' dismissal of their case. Over the next year, the group met regularly and pursued a systematic research programme. They wrote to every local authority in England, and requested details about transport policy. With the information they had gathered from their survey, the group decided to organise research visits to other local authorities. They visited Cumbria, Northumberland and Derbyshire. They also made a study trip to Holland

The group produced a report, *Fares Fair*, in which they described their research. They concluded that the public transport system in County Durham was socially unjust, in that it discriminated against the less affluent members of the community, and that it was environmentally unsustainable in that it encouraged over-reliance on private cars. The group were not content to simply publish the report. They wanted to reopen the debate with the transport professionals with whom they had had such a disappointing experience the year before. A second meeting was arranged, attended by mostly the same participants.

This time there was an entirely different atmosphere, primarily because the young people felt much more confident about their arguments. The previous year, the professionals had asserted that arrangements in County Durham, in particular the fares structure, were the best that could be provided given the semi-rural nature of the County, and the young people had been unable to challenge this claim. A year later, and they were able to use the results of their research to suggest that, far from being inevitable, a number

of alternatives existed to the Durham transport structure, which carried significant benefit to young travellers.

For example, in relation to fares, the young people were able to use the information they had gathered in Derbyshire to show that young people in Durham were paying more for their travel than others. The most important point here was not that the young people could prove beyond doubt that the Derbyshire fare structure was better, but that they were able to challenge the monopoly on knowledge claimed by the professionals. The previous year, they had been told that there was no real alternative to the fare structure in Durham. Through their research, they had demonstrated that this was not the case.

As a direct result of this meeting, and a meeting with the political leader of the local authority, the County Council made available £100,000 to be invested in a new concessionary fare scheme to reduce the cost of travel for all 14 and 15 year olds in the County. 17,000 young people stood to benefit when the scheme was introduced.

Key learning points

The creation of the new concessionary fare scheme costing a considerable sum of public money was a major political achievement for a group of young people with no previous experience of political activity. But its significance was potentially far greater than the cheaper fares it introduced for young people. If we could learn from the process, we might be able to replicate the model of practice that had been created and support other groups of young people to achieve change

The work of Jurgen Habermas provides a useful framework within which we can consider the significance of the work of the Transport Group. Habermas's ideas about dialogue, ideal speech situations and emancipator action are all relevant here. The history of the Transport Group illustrates tellingly that the conditions of effective dialogue have themselves to be fought for; that political agency demands and depends upon knowledge and information that is often hard won against bureaucratic resistance and this it is through active participation that people learn and gain new insights into their experience – in this case of transport opportunities – and into the possibilities of change in their *lifeworlds*. To use Habermasian language, there are conditions when the system's domination of the lifeworld can be challenged, but to meet them and change them requires new knowledge and learning. It is not passive academic learning of political rules and procedures that matters. It is not about assimilating technical information about politics and policies. It is in fact a new way of thinking about self and society that is involved, a reconceptualising of agency that is required and this only comes through practical engagement in a political process. These conditions are not met at all within conventional models of citizenship education in schools.

Habermas describes the rules by which genuine dialogue takes place. Dialogue is a process through which partners to the dialogue attempt to convince each other that one particular course of action is more logical than another. Participants are persuaded by the “force of the better argument”. Rules are necessary to ensure equality, freedom and fair play

Democratic deliberation of this sort requires that, not only must everyone have the opportunity to have their say, but also that participants adopt an attitude of listening to each other with respect. “To treat one another as equal dialogue partners means that we must start from the assumption that each participant has something potentially worthwhile to contribute to the discourse; that each deserves to have his or her claims considered” (Chambers, 2001, p1)

If we consider the story of the Transport Group within this analysis, it is clear that, at the first meeting with the transport professionals, there was no dialogue. Not only were the professionals unprepared to

acknowledge that the young people had a worthwhile contribution to make to the debate, the young people themselves were uncertain about the validity of their case.

The key question, then, is what happened between the two meetings which made the outcome of the second so different to the first. The original analysis of the young people themselves was that knowledge is power, and in order to compete with the professional adults, the young people need to acquire more knowledge. Only by doing so, would they win the right to become participants in the dialogue

It seems to us that the dynamics are much more complicated than this. At the first meeting, the young people put forward fundamentally the same argument that they advanced at the second meeting i.e. that the bus service in County Durham was unresponsive to their needs, and more expensive than elsewhere. Was this more persuasive the second time simply because the young people had **more** information to support their case?

To an extent, this was the case, but this on its own seems insufficient to explain the change in policy achieved by the group. Much more important, we would suggest, was the **capacity** of the young people to **sustain** their argument. Although there is no doubt that they were better informed, the main difference (which is only partly explained by their increased knowledge) was that they were much more confident that they had a good case **and** a right to make it.

Perhaps the most significant development over the 12 months was the group's growing confidence and belief in what they were doing. There was a developing **consciousness** both of the injustice of a system which was unwilling to take their views seriously, and of their **right** to be heard. Reflecting on the process afterwards, two members of the group, Melissa Haskins and Emily Card, described their "growing political awareness" and stated confidently: "We have been able to show quite clearly that we have a contribution to make to the debate, and that our ideas are worth listening to." (Benga and others, 2001, p11)

There are two important parts to this process. Furlong and Carmel suggest, "for political action to occur, people have to develop an awareness that a group to which they belong is being illegitimately disadvantaged." (Furlong and Carmel, 1997, p104) When the group left the first meeting with the transport professionals, after there had been a failure to achieve any dialogue, one of the things that was surprising was how calmly the group responded to the treatment they had received. They had been extremely realistic in their expectations. Being patronised and not being listened to by adults was part of their daily existence. It was unremarkable.

The developing of consciousness began with the realisation that the position of the adults was neither reasonable nor legitimate. Up until this point, the members of the group had simply accepted the inevitability of a system in which their views were rarely sought, and their opinions ignored. But in discussion they began to critically explore both the arguments advanced by the adults in relation to transport issues, and the general status of the adults as 'knowing best' and found both positions wanting.

The second crucial part of this process was a growing belief that this position could be challenged. The Investing in Children Transport Group sustained a high level of activity for over a year in researching and creating their report, "Fare's Fair" Their belief in the possibility of achieving change was fundamental to the group's sustainability.

To summarise, the crucial difference between the first and second meetings of the young people and the transport professionals was the development of the capacity of the young people to create and sustain a coherent argument for change. This capacity was partly as a result of increased knowledge, but mainly the

consequence of a growing consciousness amongst the young people of their right to be heard, and an awareness of the possibility of change being achieved.

Put most simply, we created the circumstances in which a genuine dialogue took place which included the contribution of young people. This was the new dynamic which led to change.

School dinners

In 2001, a group of young people at a school in the south of the county approached *Investing in Children* and asked for support in their attempt to gain improvements in the school dinner service they received. They were dissatisfied with the way the school organised the lunch break arrangements, and with quality and value for money of the actual food provided.

Investing in Children agreed to provide resources (a budget and a consultant) to the group so that they could explore the issues and prepare their arguments. Six young people, aged between 13 and 16 formed a research team.

Their research programme focused on a number of areas and used a number of techniques:

- They surveyed the opinions of other students, and analysed 455 completed questionnaires
- They conducted a door-to-door survey of the residents of houses adjacent to the school. (The school operates a policy which confines students to school grounds during the lunch break).
- They gathered the opinions of school staff and parents.
- They interviewed local shopkeepers.
- They visited a school of a similar size in the north of the County, for comparison purposes.
- They interviewed the manager of the company that provides the meals service.

The salient facts about school meals, as described by the group, are as follows: The food is provided, under contract, by an outside catering company. Lunchtime lasts for 40 minutes. The canteen is relatively small, and much time is spent queuing. Food must be eaten in the canteen. Students must remain within the school grounds during the lunch break.

After conducting their research, the group produced a report outlining their findings, and making recommendations for change. The key issues they covered were:

- *Price, choice and quality of the food.*
- *Discrimination against poor people.* Students in receipt of free school meals were faced with very little choice.
- *The lunchtime regime.* The small canteen and the brief time available meant that queuing was inevitable.
- *The lunchtime confinement.* Insisting that students stay on school premises provides the catering company with a monopoly situation.

The group went on to make a series of recommendations. They argued that extending the available time from 40 to 50 minutes, and staggering the lunchtimes so that different year groups stopped for lunch at different times (the researchers had seen this system in operation at the other school they visited) would go a long way towards relieving the overcrowding issue.

The group also argued that very little improvement in the quality or price of the food could be expected whilst the school maintained the ban on students leaving the grounds at lunchtime. The research team had noticed that services were notably better at the other school they visited, despite the fact that the same company was the supplier. At this school, pupils were free to leave the school and buy lunch in town. It was the presence of this competition, they concluded, which produced the improvement in service.

The group delivered their findings to the school in June, just before the beginning of the summer holidays. They were promised that their research, and the subsequent recommendations, would be considered by the school managers.

The outcome of the work was that very little changed. Whilst continuing to acknowledge that the standard of service provided by the catering company needed to improve, the school managers rejected the two main proposals of the research team, to extend the lunch break and to lift the ban on students leaving the grounds. Furthermore, the researchers believe that there was little or no explanation given. The decision was simply announced.

Significantly, the two most confident and experienced researchers in the group left the school at the summer break. If they had remained at the school, it is conceivable that the research team might have challenged the school management's decision, but in their absence, the remaining researchers felt unable to pursue their case, and the project came to an end.

Key learning points.

This example emphasises the inherent powerlessness of the young people's position, and the sheer difficulty of the task of promoting an alternative discourse on children and young people. The most obvious difference between the experience of this group and the *Investing in Children* Transport Group was that no dialogue took place. Despite the fact that he had been generally sympathetic to the complaints of the group, the head teacher did not feel it necessary to debate the recommendations with the group, simply informing them that the school's management had rejected them.

This research team had followed a similar process to that of the Transport Group. By gathering information from a variety of sources, they had demonstrated that the services they were receiving were poorer than those received by other young people. They had shown that there was an element of social injustice in the current arrangements (the disadvantaged position of students in receipt of free school meals). They had (successfully, in their view) addressed the arguments put forward by the school in support of the status quo. And they had put forward a coherent and logical case for change. Why, then, was the school unwilling to accept their recommendations?

We believe the answer can be found by understanding where the power lies within schools, and who determines the priorities. In a different context, *Investing in Children* was involved in a debate with the head teacher of the school involved. We were discussing the politics of education, and the pressure schools were under to achieve the targets set for them by the Department for Education and Skills and the Local Education Authority. The academic results in his school were relatively good. This was, to some extent he believed, due to the fact that the school regime was tightly managed.

We discussed the possibility of students having a greater say in school life, and whilst the head teacher obviously had sympathy for the argument that children and young people had a right to a voice, he commented that this could not be at the expense of jeopardising the academic record if the school, which was the absolute priority. To maintain this, he believed, the authority to decide school policy had to rest with him. To use again Habermasian language, this is a very good example of the ways in which the system dominates the lifeworld – in this case that of key agents in schools. From the point of view of the Head Teacher this

is a perfectly reasonable view to take and all such people are constrained by the fact that the success or failure of their schools is carefully measured in the UK and the results made public. No Head Teacher can ignore such factors. Nevertheless, they have to be understood as facets of the structure of power - of the logic of the system – that shapes the experience and perceptions of key groups of people. What *Investing in Children* has shown is that the system can be challenged and, at least at the edges, can be changed by young people.

Although there was an acknowledgement from head and teachers alike that the school dinner service was inadequate, the changes which the research team proposed would have interfered with the tight management of the school regime. I suspect that the real reason for the ban on students leaving the school at lunch was the danger that some of them would not return in the afternoon, so affecting attendance rates and ultimately exam results. A short lunch break, with the students confined to the school grounds, provides the minimum possible disruption of the core business of the school.

The dominant discourse represents children and young people as adults –in-the-making and places the focus upon their well-becoming, often at the expense of their well-being. The main purpose of the school is to equip as many students as possible with the academic preparation to become economically useful and successful adults.

The challenge represented by the research team was to argue that the present, as well as the future, was important, and that they had a right to enjoy as good a school dinner service as other young people. To have accepted this would have been to begin to acknowledge that the students were citizens with rights in the present, not simply the raw material for future citizenship.

This case study also illustrates a key difference between the struggle to achieve recognition for the rights of children and young people, and other rights movements. Children grow up. Black people stay black, women remain women, but, self-evidently, the status of children and young people is temporary. One of the crucial events in the research team's campaign to achieve change was the end of the school term, because that meant that the two strongest members of the group left the school, and moved on to college. The other, younger members did not have the confidence to challenge the school's decision to dismiss their proposals.

One final point about this case study is worth making. Achieving significant change in schools is particularly difficult. Organisationally, they are extremely unequal places, with official power resting almost exclusively with the staff. The education system in England does not recognise the right of young people to receive an education – this is a right conferred upon parents – let alone the right to a say in how it should be delivered. The governance of schools is an entirely adult matter. As various authors have suggested, even where school or student council exists they are rarely effective mechanisms. (Alderson, 2000, Landsdown 1999, previously cited).

This means that any resistance shown by young people is inevitably seen to be subversive, because the system doesn't allow for any legitimate challenge to adult authority, even though, as is demonstrated in this example, there was a reasonable case to be made. It is unsurprising and consistent with our experience in other schools, that the research group were unable to sustain their case after the school had turned them down.

This is not simply a question about a failure to produce an adequate response to a complaint about school meals. School dinners have been famously of dubious quality for generations. However the school management's unwillingness to respond to a case that was reasonably made does not give grounds for

optimism when the argument is not so well constructed or legitimately expressed. For example, as Williamson points out, “Young people who walk away from schooling are communicating something” and there is “importance in listening to them”. (Williamson and Cummings, 1999, p6).

This point is made even more forcibly by Lloyd and Munn. In a study of exclusion and excluded pupils, they comment that many of the young people they consulted “felt uninvolved in the major decisions that were taken about their lives. They felt that their voices were not important.” and they conclude “Including young people in decision-making about schools...means listening to what young people have to say, even when it is critical”. (Lloyd and Munn, 2002, p20).

Conclusions

An interim evaluation report suggested that the development of *Investing in Children* over the past six years would support the following propositions:

- Children and young people know about their environment;
- The experience of young people of public services is often of discrimination and exclusion;
- With appropriate support to articulate what they know and contribute to policy debate, young people will perform as active and responsible citizens;
- Active involvement as citizens is an open-ended learning process from which young people gain a great deal;
- Active citizenship is reflexive i.e. it leads people to develop new ideas and new actions;
- The working methods of *Investing in Children* are not always comfortable for key gatekeepers of public resources for they bring into public view the weaknesses of services and challenge current management practices. (Williamson, 2003, pp2-3).

The work of *Investing in Children* represents a challenge to the dominant discourse on childhood. In particular, it challenges the propositions that adults always know best and that children and young people are neither knowledgeable enough nor competent to make a significant contribution to political debate. Unlike other initiatives designed to promote the human rights of children, *Investing in Children* has not attempted to mirror traditional, basically adult models of political engagement. Models of representative democracy have been rejected, in favour of a model of participative democracy. This has provided significant freedoms, and we suspect explains in part why the approach taken by the project has been shown to be attractive to a wide range of children and young people of different age, ability and background.

The two case studies demonstrate both the potential for this approach to achieve significant change, and the importance of recognising where power lies in any given debate. This, we would suggest, goes to the heart of the argument about active citizenship. Active citizenship will flourish in circumstances where citizens are confident that their contribution to dialogue will be acknowledged and respected, and the force of the better argument will win the day. Active citizenship will ultimately wither and die if vested interests are able to manipulate the dialogue, and carry the decision without the necessity of making a convincing case.

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