

THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISIONS AFFECTING THEIR LIVES

A PROJECT FUNDED BY THE QUINTIN HOGG TRUST

POLICY BRIEF
NOVEMBER 2018

UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER 



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the right of young people to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives has gained considerable recognition, this is often not meaningfully achieved. Concerns regarding youth crime and the mental well-being of young people is attracting increasing nationwide attention, yet there is limited publicised consultation with young people regarding these issues and how they might be addressed. A group of researchers at Westminster Law School undertook a research project to directly involve school students in order to encourage their engagement with public decisions affecting their lives, as well as their commitment to help meet this challenge.

A number of focus groups with young people aged 16-17 years old were conducted in London, and from these focus groups several themes emerged as in need of particular discussion. These were education and the school curriculum, engagement with political decision-making, mental well-being, and violence. During a conference held at the University of Westminster young people and interested stakeholders then discussed these themes and the young people led the production of the conclusions and recommendations.

Young people told us that despite the public focus on issues of mental well-being and youth violence, these issues are largely unaddressed meaningfully within the school curriculum, the place where young people spend the greatest amounts of their time. There was in addition a strong focus on the need for young people to be taught 'life skills' in school to prepare them for political and private life as an adult, and a call for real, rather than tokenistic, engagement with young people in political and policy decision-making. Resources must be used more purposefully, and more constructively, to tackle these topics and to avoid the disenchantment of young people who are calling for support in developing the next generation of youth leaders and mentors.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

A greater emphasis is required in the school curriculum on life skills; including healthy relationships, emotional intelligence, social media awareness and basic financial skills such as budgeting. This in turn will help address issues of mental well-being and violence.

2

Politicians and policy makers should consider how they might meaningfully, systematically and realistically engage with young people, and avoid tokenistic overtures.

3

Greater thought should be given to creating extra-curricula opportunities for young people, including sporting and creative outlets, and resources should be made available for youth activities and groups outside school.

4

Training is needed to develop the necessary next generation of youth leaders and mentors.

INTRODUCTION

Although the right of young people to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives has gained considerable recognition¹, this is often not meaningfully achieved² in spite of the acknowledged importance of such participation³.

A group of researchers at Westminster Law School undertook a research project to directly involve school students in order to encourage their engagement in this issue as well as their commitment to help meet this challenge. The project was funded by The Quintin Hogg Trust. The research project team was eager to support the students in trying to make a difference to the way in which the voice of young people is ascertained, acknowledged and addressed by society in decisions about their lives. We felt that, by involving 16/17 year old school students within a structured framework, where they were able to consider and articulate the areas of law and social policy that impact upon them, and which matter most to them in their everyday lives, we would have the opportunity to work together to provide an effective and worthwhile contribution to the policy debate in these areas.

This research project is timely as the next State report under the UNCRC is due from the UK Government by January 2022 following the Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in July 2016⁴. This, having considered the report submitted by the United Kingdom⁵, contained a recommendation that structures are established for the active and meaningful participation of children and that due weight is given to their views in designing laws, policies, programmes and services at the local and national levels, including in relation to discrimination, violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, harmful practices, alternative care, sexual and reproductive education, leisure and play⁶. This project presents an opportunity to take stock of where we are in 2019 as we work towards those aims.

Throughout the project, the issue of mental well-being permeated the various topics and discussions which the students initiated. They clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of provision in this area being explained away by lack of resources, and they argued strongly that resources can be, and are found, when necessary, often after the damage has been done. They propose more constructive and propitious use of such resources. They also reject the tokenism which they feel is frequently proffered by those in authority in place of genuine interest and engagement, and they seek recognition of the urgent need for help to develop the next generation of youth leaders and mentors.

¹ See, e.g., Article 12, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was ratified by the UK on 16 December 1991

² "More work must be done by us all... we need to involve a wider range of children in all decisions that affect them, make further progress in involving children in personal decisions affecting their lives, in decisions taken at school and decisions in their local community... The challenge now... is to set the journey which takes us to our shared vision of all children having an equal place at the table ", See Davey, C., Children's participation in decision-making, A Summary Report on progress made up to 2010, 14. Participation Works by NCB, participationworks.org.uk

³ For example, Recommendation CM/Rec (2012)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18 which recognises the necessity of listening to children and young people, and giving due weight to their views in accordance with their age and maturity, and the capacities and contributions of children and young people as being a unique resource for strengthening human rights, democracy and social cohesion in European societies. refworld.org/docid/506981802.html

⁴ tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC/C/GBR/CO/5

⁵ documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G15/044/91/PDF/G1504491.pdf

⁶ Para 31 (a)

APPROACHES AND RESULTS

From September 2017, the research project team commenced the organisation of focus groups with secondary school and sixth form college students in order to identify the issues that most concern their day-to-day lives. Ethical approval for the study was sought and obtained from The University of Westminster.

The participating students were drawn from secondary schools and sixth form colleges in the London area, representing a diversity of backgrounds and systems. They fell mostly within the 16 – 17 year old age group. Through the generosity of The Quintin Hogg Trust, we were very pleased to be able to offer a gift voucher as a small token of gratitude to those who participated, and this was greatly appreciated by the young people involved.

After the focus groups had ended, feedback was provided to the institutions and students involved, and the information gathered during the focus groups was used to plan and shape the scope of the conference/workshop which was hosted by the Westminster Law School on 25 June 2018.

The topics for the conference/workshop which were distilled from the focus group discussions were:

- i. Consultation with and understanding of the views of young people; and the voting age;
- ii. Education (including university fees) and inequality/class differences, and “life lessons” on the curriculum i.e. skills and experience deficits/needs;
- iii. Violence;
- iv. Mental health and pressures on young people including those relating to education, finance and sexual harassment.

Twelve young people participated at the conference/workshop, some but not all of whom had participated in the focus groups. Several members of the Peer Outreach Workers (Greater London Authority) were involved in the conference/workshop which contributed greatly to the breadth of the discussions which took place.

The conference/workshop day began in the morning with a session where the ‘ground rules’ for the day’s activities were set out by the research project team. The students were reminded that it is fine to disagree, and that difference is good, but that this needed to be

expressed respectfully. It was explained that there was no need for the young people to reach a consensus, and that what they were seeking was an agreement on the range of views which they held and how these would be set out for the external audience later that day. The students then worked in three groups, each with at least one participant from each school/organisation. The groups picked two topics to discuss from those which had been distilled from the focus groups and notified to the students in advance for discussion at the conference/workshop (see above).

After lunch, the research project team worked with the students to identify what they would present during the afternoon's conference/workshop to the people in the external audience, and how they would present. The audience included academics and those from a range of policy and civic institutions. The external guests for the conference/workshop included the Children and Young Person Staff Officer, National Children and Young Persons' Portfolio, Police National Network, and representatives from the Children's Commissioner's Office, Westminster City Council, The Women and Girls Network, and Young Minds.

Each of the three groups decided to make a powerpoint for their presentation and to present as a group on their chosen topic, rather than to elect a speaker from the group to represent them. These topics were: (i) Education and Mental Health (ii) Violence and Mental Health, and (iii) Education.

After the presentations, a general discussion took place which involved the students and the external audience members and which was led and moderated by one of the project research team. The recommendations and thoughts which emanated from that discussion were noted on a powerpoint which had been prepared for the conference/workshop by the research team. It was clear that the students wanted more meaningful engagement with politicians and wanted their voices to be properly heard on the issues which concerned them. They felt that the opportunities which currently existed were 'tokenistic' and that, although resourcing was often cited as the reason for lack of provision, it was short-sighted and unacceptable. They emphasised the need for provision of youth clubs and young people's community groups which should be part of planning requirements for new developments. They stressed the fallacy of trying to save money on these facilities and provisions because society ultimately has to spend more money to deal with an unhappy and discontented population. They argued that it would be better to prioritise these resources earlier than doing so after serious personal detriment to young people who have nothing to do, and nowhere to go, to develop their legitimate societal interests. Mental well-being was a common thread which ran through the discussions, and the need for this to be added to the curriculum in creative ways was emphasised, for example through theatre, PSE (Personal, Social and Health Education) speakers, including mental well-being or domestic violence survivor role models.

CONCLUSIONS

A clear message coming from this small-scale empirical research is that the young people who participated wish to be more involved in decisions about their lives, and this includes the curriculum which they study.

They recognise and welcome the requirement to become fully functioning and contributing members of society and wish to be able to exercise their votes in an informed manner. However, they feel that not enough is done to prepare them to do so. They reject tokenism, and want meaningful involvement, especially from politicians. Similarly, they want to be able to operate effectively in the adult world which they are joining but feel that they lack the practical knowledge to enable them to do so with confidence as independent thinkers, without remaining reliant on the adults in their lives to guide or influence their choices. They therefore advocate strongly for the inclusion of political lessons and life skills on the curriculum for sixth form students, the latter to include those associated with budgeting and finance.

They want greater thought to be given to the way in which ability streaming is used within schools, and the labels which are attached to being in particular groups. They feel this impacts unfairly on those from less privileged backgrounds, as does the lack of sports opportunities currently available to some school students. In this context, they call for the development and re-opening of youth clubs and young people's community groups to provide appropriate and vital environments for their growth, in particular for those who have nowhere to go and nothing to do in order to develop their legitimate societal interests.

They are worried about mental well-being, and are seeking ways to minimise the stigma associated with this issue which they argue should be capable of open, and unembarrassed, discussion. They support a positive approach to this issue, and propose innovation to achieve these outcomes, advocating the addition of mental well-being to the school curriculum, the use of mental health/domestic violence role models in the school environment, and the employment of drama and theatre for this purpose.

They are realistic about the need for financial resources to generate these changes, as well as for the other required services for students and young people who need different types of help which they do not currently receive. They appeal for creativity from those in authority to seek and find ways to provide resources to fund these needs. They stressed that training is needed to help to develop the necessary next generation of youth leaders and mentors.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the conclusions, four key recommendations have emerged. We hope these will be taken into consideration by policy makers and those campaigning on issues affecting young people.

1

A call for a greater emphasis in the school curriculum on life skills; including healthy relationships, emotional intelligence, social media awareness and basic financial skills such as budgeting. This in turn will help address issues of mental well-being and violence.

2

Politicians and policy makers should consider how they might meaningfully, systematically and realistically engage with young people, and avoid tokenistic overtures.

3

Greater thought should be given to creating extra-curricula opportunities for young people, including sporting and creative outlets, and resources should be made available for youth activities and groups outside school.

4

Training is needed to develop the necessary next generation of youth leaders and mentors.

We are hopeful that the young people who participated in this research project will continue, through their fortified commitment and enhanced appreciation of the difference which it is possible for them to make, to highlight the importance of paying proper regard to the voice of young people in decisions affecting their lives. The early signs are encouraging. However, more needs to be done to support them in this quest. A golden opportunity exists through education to consciously address many of the concerns they have expressed and to make the school curriculum more enabling, more relevant for the life of young people today, and more responsive to their needs.

This call for action needs to be heard.

THE PROJECT TEAM

The project team, Professor Marilyn Freeman, Professor Lisa Webley, Dr. Simon Flacks, Hannah Camplin, and Manvir Grewal, expresses its thanks to the Quintin Hogg Trustees for their financial support for this project.

