Executive summary

Empowering children to be active participants in society has emerged as a critical aim of policy agendas across the OECD. Yet, achieving this aim is far from simple. Set against the backdrop of changes in the way society understands childhood and the role of the child, as well as the opportunities and challenges posed by the digital environment, this publication delves into the meaning of child empowerment today and explores its implications for education systems.

By defining key concepts and examining the roles of children as citizens, this volume provides valuable insights into how OECD countries are empowering children, amidst trends including declining physical activity, increased stress and anxiety, COVID-19, a changing media landscape and persistent digital inequalities. This volume takes stock of how these broad themes interact with the often repeated but rarely articulated call to empower children. This volume centres it's analysis around three core opportunities.

Enhanced well-being

Good things happen when children are empowered to act on issues that are important and relevant to them. Child empowerment enhances well-being, self-esteem and leadership skills, nurturing children as competent, confident members of society. When child empowerment is done well and children have authentic opportunities to participate in crafting things like school policies and practices, they tend to be better suited to contribute positively to school climates and social cohesion.

Better policy making

Child empowerment is increasingly recognised as an essential aim of educational policies within OECD countries, though it often lacks clear definition and implementation strategies. Giving children a greater role in policy making empowers them to actively participate in how decisions are taken by contributing their unique and valuable perspectives. Actively participating in society and decision-making processes that are both relevant and age-appropriate supports their personal development and ensures that educational and societal policies and practices better reflect their needs and perspectives.

Stronger democracies

It is by now well-recognised that, in order to navigate today's increasingly digital world effectively, children require critical thinking, digital literacy and ethical awareness. These competences are also crucial for participating in democratic processes. When education systems equip children with the skills to engage as informed citizens, they can enhance democracies by opening up new possibilities for people to have their say. Creating supportive ecosystems involving teachers, parents, policymakers, researchers and children themselves is essential for nurturing these competencies and supporting children's active engagement in society.

Current conditions may be hindering child empowerment

Empowering children is only possible if policy makers directly, and effectively, tackle a number of key challenges. This requires more attention to be paid to establishing a sufficient baseline of conditions such as physical health, emotional well-being, digital literacy, and access to necessary resources. At present, physical activity levels among children are insufficient and many children experience challenges to their emotional well-being including increasing loneliness and feelings of anxiety.

The digital environment offers a wide range of arenas for empowerment, yet engagement in activism, debate and peer communities remains modest with only a minority of children engaging in these behaviours. Part of this could be related to a lack of digital skills, as well as media literacy skills such as the ability to distinguish fact from opinion. This skill gap is crucial because it influences children's ability and confidence in engaging with content critically, as well as their skills to make informed decisions, which is a fundamental aspect of empowerment. While digital platforms could be powerful tools for children's civic engagement, their potential is not yet fully harnessed. Moreover, children in poorer regions or from lower socio-economic backgrounds face significant barriers to accessing digital tools and also in leveraging their (often limited) skills to seize the digital opportunities while managing risks of harm.

Addressing the challenges requires cultural and systemic change

OECD countries have been working hard for many years to empower children, and a wealth of research, educational interventions and policies exists to help, many of which are documented in this publication. However, navigating the multifaceted challenges requires a systemic shift in the mindsets of those working in education systems, including how they perform their roles and how they interact with children.

Shifting roles and responsibilities for children, who are more often these days seen as agents of change than as vulnerable beings in need of protection, can be met with apprehension by some adults. Including children as stakeholders in decision-making processes requires a rethink of how these processes might have traditionally been done in order to avoid common pitfalls such as tokenism, manipulation, decoration or simply recreating adult structures and trying to fit children into these structures. Adapting how societies and schools engage with stakeholders, including children, to ensure equitable representation, particularly of those from disadvantaged groups, and requiring all processes to uphold children's rights and safety can be resource-intensive. It requires adult buy-in and can be challenging to get right.

Structural challenges across schools, such as high staff turnover both in terms of teachers and leadership, can further complicate the goals of empowering children. Being an empowering educator is no easy task, and teachers need high-quality professional development opportunities. Greater systematic support for school partnerships with external actors may help lighten the load, for instance in the provision of consistent high-quality mental health support. Yet, partnerships between schools and external actors are often left up to individual institutions. Schools require dedicated, system-wide mechanisms to support partnerships.

Lastly, persistent digital inequalities, influenced by geographical and socio-economic factors, remain a significant barrier, necessitating focused research and policy development to ensure digital equity and inclusion for all children. This comprehensive approach must aim to transform educational practices to emphasise empowerment, address socio-economic disparities, enhance mental health support, and expand digital equity and inclusion efforts, thereby creating a nurturing ecosystem where every child can thrive and play a role in actively shaping our shared future.

Education systems need to be part of a co-ordinated, whole-of-society approach to promote children's rights and well-being both inside and out of the classroom. This means working across government and ensuring policy making processes meaningfully reflect child rights and participation. This necessitates the establishment (or strengthening) of clear legislative frameworks, strategies and evaluation practices that mandate the inclusion of children in decision-making processes at all levels of government.

From:

What Does Child Empowerment Mean Today?
Implications for Education and Well-being

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/8f80ce38-en