

7 Towards an empowered future for all children

This volume has explored what child empowerment means today through various policy and research lenses. This concluding chapter provides a summary of why empowering children is important in the 21st Century and gives an overview of cross-cutting themes that emerged throughout the chapters of this volume. The chapter highlights some key considerations and conditions necessary in ensuring an empowered future for all children.

What does child empowerment mean today?

The pursuit of child empowerment is a critical endeavour for education. This publication set out to discuss the implications of current research and policy measures, offering insights to inform how OECD countries empower children as we move further into the 21st Century.

Empowered children have the opportunity and ability to act on issues important and relevant to them, can learn by making mistakes, and are key contributors to democracy. Children are not just adults in the making, they are part of the fabric of society and are able to help shape our shared future. Reaching this goal requires the right adults, institutions, opportunities and conditions.

Empowerment of children is more than just a buzzword; it is - quite rightly - at the very core of education systems. Schools are perfectly positioned to provide children with the skills and mindsets they need to take action on issues that are important and relevant to them, and to be productive members of modern societies. But education cannot be expected to take on that responsibility alone. Nor should children themselves be held solely responsible for their own empowerment or exercising agency in ways adults think they should. Children have the right to participate, and also have the right to choose not to participate. Childhood is a time to learn by taking risks and having the space to be free to make mistakes. The liberty to do this is one facet of empowerment.

Emerging cross-cutting themes: The importance of adults, institutions, opportunities and the right conditions

While the topics covered in this publication are varied, there are some main themes that consistently emerge. These themes, and how they relate to empowerment, are summarised below and in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1. Main themes of child empowerment

Empowered children act on issues important and relevant to them, can learn by making mistakes, and are key contributors to democracy. Children are not just adults in the making, they are part of the fabric of society and are able to help shape our shared future.		
They can be supported by...		
<p>Adults</p> <p>Hold much of the power in how to make spaces accessible, safe and open for children to truly participate.</p> <p>Require appropriate skills, knowledge, capacities and mindsets. For example, valuing child perspectives.</p> <p>Should not underestimate the important role they can take in inspiring, supporting and encouraging children to seize opportunities.</p>	<p>Institutions</p> <p>Can collaborate across sectors to better support children.</p> <p>Set meaningful incentives so that empowering children is part of the work, not extra work.</p> <p>Co-ordinate approaches and ensure consistency both within and between schools to support all children to seize opportunities to learn and participate in relevant experiences.</p>	<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Are relevant and age-appropriate to facilitate participation from children with different backgrounds, affinities and perspectives.</p> <p>Can bring children's lived experiences into policy and practice to ensure they are more tailored to children's wants and needs.</p> <p>To see children as competent actors, capable of making decisions about their lives.</p>
Conditions: Equity, physical and emotional well-being, realisation of child rights, and development of the research base.		

Source: Author's elaboration

Adults are needed as allies in the push for child empowerment

Adults including teachers, parents, policy makers and researchers all have a role to play in empowering children. Adults hold much of the power in how to make spaces accessible, safe and open for children to truly participate, and can work with children to ensure that their learning experiences and participation is rooted in contexts that they understand and are relevant for them. The research suggests that this is not a zero-sum game, but that child empowerment benefits processes that are typically seen as adult-centric. This might vary between different cultural contexts, but the message that children should be empowered and their rights fully realised and supported should be consistent across all OECD countries.

Adults should not underestimate the important role they can take in inspiring, supporting and encouraging children to seize opportunities and pave their unique paths forward through life. As Caitlin Faye Maniti reminds us in Chapter 6, sometimes all it takes is “one good adult” to give a push in the right direction to encourage a child to potentially face their fears, maybe take a risk and make the most of the opportunities they may have before them. This can be intimidating for anyone, adults or children, to do alone. Having the support of a trusted mentor can open many doors for children that they may not have had knowledge of or access to otherwise.

It cannot be assumed that adults automatically have the skills, knowledge and mindsets to empower children by virtue of simply being older. Systematic supports need to be in place to build these capacities so they are comfortable with this responsibility and can recognise opportunities to make a difference. For instance, adults need to understand that children’s perspectives, although different to adult perspectives, have real value for how we approach societal challenges and craft innovative solutions.

Institutions must address fragmentation in the policy and practice landscapes

A common thread that emerges throughout this publication is that child empowerment strategies sometimes lack coherence, co-ordination and buy-in from all essential stakeholders. Some countries are more advanced on this front than others, such as Ireland which has established a child participation unit in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and implemented a National Strategy on child and youth participation in decision making. In many countries however, initiatives for empowerment or participation are neither comprehensive nor coherent and require initiative to be taken at the school or even individual classroom level. This means approaches may be ad-hoc, and depend on teachers or school leaders who are particularly interested or able to implement them, on top of already very high workloads. Co-ordinating approaches and ensuring consistency both within and between schools will support all children seize opportunities to learn and participate in empowering experiences. Policies that champion student involvement, seek their perspectives, and integrate their lived experiences are vital for creating an education system that truly empowers.

In addition to the educational institutions where children spend so much of their time, child empowerment requires collaboration across policy, research, business and beyond. Although empowerment looks different in different contexts, the principles of involving children and making space for them is not just a moral call, it is based on research showing that this can improve processes. Empowerment can be a part of the work, not extra work.

Seizing opportunities means recognising children as competent social actors

One of the strongest messages that has emerged from this work is that children can and should be seen as competent actors who are capable of making decisions about their lives, including their education and within their societies. This is essential from a human rights perspective, but also because their empowerment is associated with a whole host of positive externalities such as higher levels of well-being, confidence and civic participation. Involving children as stakeholders and learning from their lived

experiences can benefit policy and practice, ensuring they are more tailored to children's wants and needs while also more effectively targeting the issues that are faced by children in the 21st Century.

This requires relevant and age-appropriate opportunities to participate and an education that gives space for children to see how the skills, mindsets and knowledge they are expected to acquire are reflected in their context. It is important to keep in mind that empowering children to participate in decision making does not mean children always have the final and/or only say on things that are important to them. It means that they have the opportunity to contribute and are listened to, and that policies and practices should be shaped with their interests, and what is in their best interests and the interests of relevant stakeholders, in mind.

Co-ordinated policies and more research can improve conditions for child empowerment

This publication outlines a number of challenges and threats to child empowerment. This includes worrying trends in child well-being such as decreasing physical activity, increasing rates of anxiety and higher levels of loneliness. Children also face barriers to empowerment when they experience social and digital exclusion, and can lack adequate support in navigating a media environment that is increasingly complex yet deeply interwoven into their daily realities. These issues are high on the policy agendas of countries around the world, and many have developed policies and practices, often in co-ordination with other actors (ministries, research bodies, teachers, parents and children themselves) to improve the conditions children face at school and at home. Empowering environments are safe, not sterile. Children can benefit from exposure to a manageable level of everyday risk to support the development of their resilience, well-being and crucial skills such as media and digital literacy.

This report outlines a number of promising policies and practices employed by OECD member countries to promote child empowerment, ranging from ways to include them in decision making, to supporting their well-being and providing learning opportunities to help them seize opportunities in civic and digital spaces. However, we need more research about which practices and policies are most effective and how these can be implemented at scale across entire education systems. Often the links between the various policies and practices and their intended outcomes are weak, or further research is needed to ascertain whether they can support all students, including the most disadvantaged. For instance, some policies or practices to encourage child participation may favour students from more advantaged backgrounds. Finding ways to extend opportunities to all students and ensure all groups can benefit from these policies and practices is key.

Another gap in the literature is how best to support teachers and school leaders to promote child empowerment in their classrooms and schools. There are some promising examples of teacher education programmes, practices teachers can employ in their schools, and how teachers can root their classroom teaching in the lived experiences of their students to involve them and get them excited about their learning journeys. However, more research on effective professional development and the supports teachers need in implementing the specifics of child empowerment approaches would be welcome.

Much of this report explores policies and practices that target older children and adolescents. There is less literature on younger children and how empowerment strategies can better target them. The same stands for children from marginalised or vulnerable backgrounds. Ensuring that opportunities for empowerment are equitable and inclusive, as well as proactive regarding children's ages, stages and abilities is key.



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