

Public Policy, Equality and Diversity in the Context of Devolution

Seminar 1: Universal Principles of Equality: Implications for Different Groups

Sponsored by the ESRC and the Northern Ireland Equality Commission

Children and the Equalities Agenda: Abstract

This paper considers the way children and the children's rights movement fit with the new equalities agenda. It discusses the extent to which we can equate the rights of children as a discriminated against group with the rights of other discriminated against groups.

Central to the paper is the notion that the work of the equalities commissions and bodies has traditionally tended to be adult focused and adult based; that the challenge for the new equalities bodies will be to ensure children are seen as people with full human rights that are at least as important as those of adults.

The paper examines three points where adults' politics and rights' intersect with children's politics and rights. These are used as case studies to highlight that; children's rights are often subordinated to adults' rights; some progress has been made to shape provision to take account of what children want; challenges remain.

Child care. It is argued that services in this area have developed out of the drive for women's legal and financial independence. Traditionally they have tended to have been shaped by the needs of women as workers, focused more around the needs of the 'carer' than the 'cared-for'. Children's needs have not been considered with equal importance. Progress has been made. There is evidence from some local authorities that children as young as three can be articulate about the kind of day care they want. This has been incorporated into the development of new policy and service provision.

Domestic abuse. Despite large numbers of children living with and affected by domestic abuse, despite there being more children in Refuge than women, these services have been shaped largely by the (very real) needs of women. The needs of children have been subordinate. Progress has been made. Children's interests have been included in shaping Scotland's national strategy to address domestic abuse.

Services in both these areas have developed with children's needs being less important than women's. There has been little space for children to define what they need in relation to these services. No good mechanisms have been developed for asking them what they want. What has been missed is the quality of children's day to day experiences – in institutionalised child care and in Refuge.

A focus where adults' rights and children's rights had been genuinely seen to be equally important could have led to very different kinds of services. If full account had been taken of how children wanted to spend their day, or the kind of services that would have been useful to them, services may have developed very differently.

Physical punishment of children. This is used to highlight one major, taken for granted way in which the rights of the children are subordinated to the rights of adults. Children are currently the only group remaining in society without the right to physical integrity enshrined in law.

Commissioners for Children VS Equalities Bodies. The paper argues that we are at a major juncture. At the same time as we are setting up single equalities bodies, we are also setting up new offices of Commissioners for Children. As yet, the relationship between these remains unarticulated. While Commissioners for Children will play a vital role in safeguarding the rights of children, it is crucial we do not see children's rights as the exclusive domain of these offices.

Conclusion: The paper concludes by arguing that the challenge for the new equalities bodies is for them to be less adult based, to see children as full citizens, with full rights, whose needs are neither lumped in with or subordinate to the needs of adults. Putting children and their needs and views fully in the picture will be fairer and ensure more rounded policy. The paper argues that there are major challenges for all of us in finding new ways to genuinely extend democracy to children and begin to create a world where children's interests are not subordinate to adults. This surely needs to start with the new equalities bodies. A challenging equalities project indeed!

Anne Stafford

February 2005