

1

Every Child Matters and the Social Justice Agenda

This chapter explores:

- > what is meant by social justice;
- > that social justice is the principles by which everyone in society should have the opportunity to maximize their life-chances, achieve well-being and flourish;
- > how the concept of social justice is a principle of what has become known as the welfare state;
- > how social justice cannot be realized unless we understand, through exploring the theory of oppression, that our assumptions, values and beliefs impact on the life-experiences of others;
- > how social justice is the principle at the heart of the Every Child Matters agenda; and
- > how teaching children about social justice is part of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework and the National Curriculum.



The principles of how everyone can achieve equitable access to the goods available in society, for example, housing, food, health and education, is a concern that has long occupied humanity. Social justice is a principle that is currently used in Britain to underpin public policy and practice with a view to ensuring all have an equal chance to attain the necessary goods and conditions they need to thrive and achieve well-being. Embedded in the concept of social justice is the idea of *fairness* (DfES, 2005: 21), that is, in a fair society all should have an equal chance of achieving well-being. However, society is not a homogenous entity. It comprised a huge number of smaller groups between which is an unequal distribution of power and access to goods, and as part of the unequal power distribution some groups will wittingly – or unwittingly – discriminate against others. In this way, some are prevented from being able to achieve well-being.

6 ENSURING EVERY CHILD MATTERS

The Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda, through its five outcomes for well-being seeks, through the principle of social justice, to ensure children and families are supported in achieving health, safety, enjoyment of and achievement in learning, and that they can play their part in the community and achieve economic well-being. While these outcomes can be recognized for children and families in the short term, in some cases with considerable support from others, the goal of the ECM agenda is to provide children and families with the long-term skills, knowledge and understanding to be able to achieve these outcomes for themselves. And, if as individuals we have a concern in helping children and families achieve these goals, we need to be clear about the principles that underpin the ECM agenda to ensure we are best equipped to be working to see it realized. For these reasons, this chapter begins with unpacking what is meant by social justice, as understanding this is fundamental to being clear about how to approach the rest of the ECM agenda.

What is social justice?

Most of us are familiar with the notion of justice and use a very sound working knowledge of it in our day-to-day lives. However, given time to think through exactly what we might mean by justice, it quickly becomes evident that it is not one thing, but that there are a number of aspects to the concept of justice.

In Western Europe it is usually the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato (424–347 BCE), who is credited with first exploring justice and establishing our current uses of the term (Hinman, 2003: 243). From Plato we have derived the notion that justice is a good thing for society, that we should seek to be able to call ourselves a 'just' society and that a just society is something of value and is worth striving for (Hinman, 2003: 245). The absolute definition of the concept of justice is still under discussion – nearly 2400 years later – but generally when we talk of justice two principle things we expect from it are what we might call retributive justice and distributive justice.

- >Retributive justice is the term applied to the notion of imposing a penalty, sometimes a punishment for the breaking of an agreed rule or a law.
- >Distributive justice is about how a 'just' society might share or distribute limited, but necessary, things that everyone needs to thrive (De Botton, 2001: 94; Graham, 2007: 15; Hinman, 2003: 249).

There are other aspects to justice that could be explored: restorative justice, for example, which rather than being concerned with punishment as in retributive justice, has more to do with re-establishing harmony, perhaps in a society that has experienced some form of civil unrest, possibly including acts of oppression by one group against another (Hinman, 2003: 257). There are also concepts of 'natural' justice and the notion of a just reward; in both these aspects of justice there is the implication that there is some natural order outside human political constructs and rules that would seem to govern what is just in certain

instances, over and above what human rules might state. In terms of the concept of social justice, it is the principle of distributive justice that we are most engaged with.

Distributive justice is concerned with how a society 'in which everything currently and conventionally regarded as a benefit or an advantage is freely available to all' (Boucher, 1998: 255). In Britain it has become the case that the government is the main agent for ensuring that benefits and advantages are accessible to all and that they are fairly distributed (Boucher, 1998). However, in distributing goods, the agency undertaking the distribution is faced with resolving two important issues:

1. How do we know how much of each of these benefits and advantages any one person should have?
2. Were we start from a position where there is already an unequal distribution of these benefits and advantages – where some people seems to have none and others have them in abundance – what processes do we use to even things out?

The answer to the first question is usually tackled in terms of establishing a notion of a *minimum* of housing, food, education, health and education that an individual needs to survive (Boucher, 1998: 256), and that it is the minimum that everyone is entitled to so that they are kept from living in poverty. (Poverty is discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.) However, finding a distribution method – or possibly even a *redistribution* method to ensure all have an equal chance to enjoy the benefits and advantages a society has to offer – is a considerable challenge and the rest of this chapter explores how social justice seeks to provide a way forward in meeting this challenge.

Well-being and flourishing

Boucher (1998), in exploring the notion of what a minimum of benefits and advantages might be, also reminds us that as a society we are not just concerned with physical well-being, the need for food, shelter and health care, but also with what might constitute 'the minimum conditions for the promotion of self-realization' (Boucher, 1998: 83).

The notion that human self-realization or well-being ought to be as important for human flourishing as having access to the basics for survival is one that, in Europe, was explored by Aristotle (384 BC–322 BCE) and stills continues to exercise us. More recently it is the work of psychologist Abraham Maslow who is central to the discussion that human experience ought to be about more than simply having the means to survive. Writing in the 1950s, Maslow developed what has become known as 'Maslow's hierarchy of needs'. This notion is usually expressed diagrammatically in the form of a pyramid. At the base of the pyramid, the pyramid's widest part, Maslow places the basic needs human

8 ENSURING EVERY CHILD MATTERS

being have that must be met in order for them simply to survive, for example, food, drink, shelter, warmth, and so on. As we move up the pyramid and the pyramid narrows, then the needs identified by Maslow move through the need to be safe, to belong, be loved and have friends, through to esteem needs. At the very top of the pyramid is what Maslow calls 'self-actualization', or personal growth and fulfilment. The notion of the pyramid is particularly powerful, since it also represents how, as we move 'up' the pyramid from basic needs to self-actualization, the access to the goods or conditions we need to help us achieve self-actualization becomes narrower, or more restricted (Plummer, 2005: 18). Some have questioned that in order to live human beings need to be self-actualized at all. However, while the need for food and drink is self-evident in terms of survival, Maslow argues that self-actualization is also crucial to the flourishing of the individual and to society in general. Self-actualization is about how the individual sees themselves, and what 'the person sees' will enable or prevent not only their own flourishing but how they will function in relation to others (Freiberg, 1999: 4).

Therefore, in seeking to distribute societal advantages and benefits we are not only concerned with a minimum level of existence, but also with what individuals need, overall, to thrive. Human flourishing is not only about the basics needed to survive, it is also influenced by an individual's access to an education which enables enjoyment and achievement, including enjoying a sense of personal safety, being able to contribute to the community and having the means to achieve personal and long-term economic well-being; indeed, all the outcomes of the Every Child Matters agenda.

The welfare state

In Britain there has long been a concern for how best to provide the conditions for everyone to flourish. In effect the roots of social justice, although called by another name, can be found in laws that date from the seventeenth century. Laws that state how the poor are to be provided for, or 'Poor Laws', first appeared in 1598 (Social Policy in the UK, 2008). Further Poor Laws, for example that of 1601, placed the duty on church parishes to levy a 'compulsory poor rate', ensure the appointment of "overseers" of relief and ensure that there was *provision for 'setting the poor on work'* (Social Policy in the UK, 2008), all of which are principles we recognize as still being part of the current welfare system.

The mechanisms by which we currently seek to achieve universal flourishing, and that, in part the government has a responsibility to ensure this happens, began to emerge in the 1940s (Lund, 2002: 1). In 1942 the idea of what has become the welfare state was first outlined in the Beveridge Report (Lund, 2002: 107) and began to take the shape we recognize now from 1948 onwards. That is, we now expect the welfare state to provide the following:

- > social security (money for those who are currently unemployed or unable to work);
- > free health care at the point of need;
- > affordable housing for all;
- > free education; and
- > other free welfare services for children (Lund, 2002: 107; Social Policy in the UK, 2008).

These ideas began to be explored at the end of the nineteenth century, mainly through the influence of a group that became known as the 'British Idealists' (Boucher, 1998: 83; Lund, 2002: 1). Over time, their exploration of how goods should be shared and, in particular, provided for those who seem not to have ready access to enough goods to flourish, has formed the principles of governments' welfare policies (Lund, 2002). What is new about using the ECM agenda to tackle these issues, compared with other government welfare policies, is that while it is recognized that it may be necessary, in some instances, to *give* goods to children and families, the long-term objective is that, through education and other multi-agency support, children and families can develop their own capacities to provide these goods for themselves. That is, with the appropriate initial support, children will grow up with the skills, knowledge and understanding of how to:

- > maintain their own health – through adopting a healthy lifestyle;
- > keep themselves safe – in the broadest sense;
- > achieve economic well-being and contribute to the community.

Importantly for all who work or intend to work with children and their families, in Early Years settings or schools, central to the success of the ECM agenda is that children enjoy learning and achieve in their learning across all phases of education, from the very early years onwards, since this is where the foundations for long-term well-being and the achievement of all the outcomes are set.

Traditionally, in British politics these notions of welfare policy and social justice have seemed to 'sit' more comfortably in the socialist, or 'left-wing', tenets of welfare policy principles, where 'socialism is perhaps the ancestor' (Boucher, 1998: 255) of these ideas. Indeed the ECM agenda is a Labour government policy. However, social justice is now seen as an integral principle of both main political parties' welfare policies and this was signalled in 2005 by the Conservative Party when they, too, pledged their commitment to pursuing welfare through the principles of a social justice. In a press release they acknowledged that their approach to dealing with the 'causes and consequences of poverty in Britain' would be through measures that 'empower the least well-off to climb the ladder from poverty to wealth' and that this would be through an approach that applied the principles of 'social justice' (BBC, 2005b).

Life-chances

What continues to exercise those concerned with social justice is that, despite these seemingly considerable advances in providing equal access to the goods discussed, we still live in a society that has families living in poverty, and for some families this seems to happen generation after generation. In understanding why this continues to happen, we need to consider how access to goods has actually been managed and controlled.

One of the most influential theorists in this field is John Rawls (Graham, 2007). Rawls was concerned to explore, not only the rules by which goods might be divided up between members of a society, but the factors that impact on deciding those rules and who makes the rules in the first instance. For example, he was aware of how important 'luck' seemed to be in enabling persons to thrive, the 'luck' that comes with being born into particular groups in society, groups that then make for better life-chances than others. And 'Rawls was acutely aware of the extent to which' luck is not deserved – it is 'simply luck' (Hinman, 2003: 245). That is, should our chances of flourishing and achieving well-being be determined only by accident – something that we have no control over? As a sophisticated civilized society, surely we ought to be able to establish a way of ensuring factors that are under our control can be used to better our life-chances, so that we can be active agents in the process and not simply have to rely on something as arbitrary as accident of birth. Through his work, Rawls examined how inequalities of birth impact on life-chances and perpetuate injustices in society, particularly those linked to the race, class or religion a person may be born into. He explored how these injustices occasioned by birth might be mitigated against, so we might create a just society in which luck plays a minimal role in enabling individuals to thrive (Hinman, 2003: 245). Rawls explored the notion of writing principles – or what he termed 'rules' – for the distributing or redistributing goods through what he called the veil of ignorance (Hinman, 2003: 246). That is, if we were to write the rules for the distribution of goods, without knowing what our position in society is to be, for example, the family we are to be born into, we may find that we have very different notions of what the rules should be when we do discover who our family is and how those rules actually impact on us.

Activity

You are writing the rules that govern 'going on holiday', write five principles, or rules that you believe every holiday should be based on.

You have written these principles behind the *veil of ignorance*. Now consider the following, you are a member of a family of five, and in your family there are two working adults – a man and a woman who are partners and parents of a 15-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl – and an 85-year-old man, who is the father of one

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of the adults and who is living with them. How do your rules work in deciding about this family's holiday?

Now imagine that the family have an annual income of £27,000 and that the maximum they can spend on the holiday is £1,500 – how does that affect your principles about the holidaying?

Now imagine what holiday you might want from the point of view of each member of the family. Go back to your original list of principles, how have they changed?

The social justice theory of oppression

It can be argued that, leaving luck aside, British society already provides considerable equal access to all benefits and advantages. A child might be born into a household that is impoverished in terms of food and housing, but society will provide it with access to health care and education and through these benefits the child has the opportunity to move from poverty into a more flourishing life. However, there are other theorists of social justice who claim that this is not the case since there are other factors at work, besides luck of birth, that mitigate against individuals being able to flourish, these factors are discussed in the next section through exploring the concept of the *theory of oppression*.

In discussing the benefits and advantages children and families need to thrive and flourish we have concentrated on tangible things. Things that exist in a physical form and can be given to, or acquired by others. Theorists of social justice claim that there are factors that impact on the likelihood of individual flourishing that are as influential to life-outcomes, but are far less tangible and therefore more difficult to distribute between those that have and those that are impoverished. Rawls explores these intangible benefits and advantages in terms of how they are linked to the race and class individuals are born into (Ilinman, 2003: 245), and these factors generally in social justice theories of oppression are seen as being defining factors in impacting on an individual's life-chances. We know that there are inequality between families in terms of the level of material goods and wealth they have (Wissenberg, 1999), but it is also the case that inequalities exist between the cultural groups that we are born into, whether we define these groups by ethnicity, religion or class. Within British society, the cultural group that a child is born into will determine the level of success the child will have in accessing the advantages and benefits available. This is not necessarily because these goods will not be, in theory, available to all children, but because, in reality, the attitudes and beliefs held by some groups in society prevent all groups from being able to successfully access them.

12 ENSURING EVERY CHILD MATTERS

As proponents of the theory of oppression Adams et al. (2007), explore how some groups in British society hold more economic and cultural power than others, and it is most often these groups that also have the control over goods and how these goods are distributed. What is in under scrutiny here is not the actual dividing up of the goods, but the way in which the values, beliefs and attitudes of those in a position to divide up the goods, prevent this from happening. That is, either deliberately or unwittingly, some groups oppress others and prevent them from making the most of the life-chances available. 'We use the term oppression rather than discrimination, bias, prejudice, or bigotry to emphasise the pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness' (Adams et al., 2007: 3).

We are all members of a range of groups, each with a set of beliefs, values and attitudes that bind the group together. In any one day, we will pass in and out of a number of groups. Sometimes we are in groups that are being oppressed by others and sometimes we are the oppressors. That we are being oppressed or are oppressors is often invisible to us, unless it is brought to our attention. In our own homes we might have quite a lot of power, particularly over certain elements of what happens there; other aspects of home life we have to negotiate. At work, or when we go out into society, we may have to do what others tell us – or we may be in a position of authority and tell others what to do – again, this might involve some negotiation. When we are with our friends we may feel we are with a group where the power is fairly evenly distributed – and, indeed, for many these are the groups from which they derive the greatest sense of well-being. Besides these small groups we are members of, we are also part of wider societal groups, for example, we can be grouped by gender, ethnicity, religion and class, and often there are inequalities in power relationships between these groups, which may or may not affect our ability to access the benefits and advantages on offer and our capacity to achieve long-term well-being.

Social justice is concerned with exploring the power that different groups have, both at local and national levels and how the values attitudes and beliefs that bind the members of groups together cause them to exercise oppressive power over other groups. 'Oppression not only resides in external social institutions and norms but lodges in the human psyche as well', and not only this, 'but oppressive beliefs are internalized by victims as well as perpetrators' (Adams et al., 2007: 4).

That is, for us to have a truly equal society, not only must we recognize when we are being oppressed, but when we are oppressing too. Oppression is an important concept to understand and reflect on, since it not only affects the way we behave towards others, but it also 'restricts both self-development and self-determination' (Adams et al., 2007: 3). Oppression happens in this way because we are not lone individuals, we live as members of groups and communities and 'our identities are fundamentally constructed in relation to others and to the cultures in which we are embedded' (Adams et al., 2007: 9). We take on the values, beliefs and attitudes of those around us, and our actions are influenced by these attitudes and beliefs, however inadvertently, and have an

impact, positively or negatively, on the lives of others. Most people wish to have a positive impact on the lives of others, particularly those who work or intend to work with children and families. The problem here is that we may be making assumptions, based only on our beliefs, that what we are doing is best for others, so we need to examine very carefully just where we got our beliefs and attitudes from, and what our evidence is for knowing they are correct, before we use them as our only guide to managing the lives of others.

That we are complicit in the ongoing situation of oppression, in terms of how we allow ourselves to be oppressed and continue to oppress others, is explored by Gramsci's notion of notion of hegemony whereby Gramsci suggests: 'a dominant group can so successfully project its particular way of seeing social reality that its view is accepted as common sense, as part of the natural order, even by those who are disempowered by it' (Adams et al., 2007: 10). That such a state of affairs can happen is possible because, as the idea of hegemony explains, we all live in complex relationships, one with another. And power is not necessarily always imposed by one group onto another; power tensions can exist within groups, too. Therefore, whatever are the values, attitudes and beliefs of one, or a few, dominant persons in a group can become – if other members of the group allow it to happen – the dominant discourse for that group.

Part of what causes the tension and oppressive practices within and between groups is the notion of privilege. Specifically, some groups or individuals are, for whatever reasons, advantaged and they are the ones who determine what comes to be regarded as 'normal' in terms of values, attitudes and beliefs. Tensions also occur where groups act as if what are their own values, attitudes and beliefs are 'normal' not only for themselves, but for everyone else too and try to make their views the prevailing view. Another way of expressing this idea is through the concept of dominant discourses, that is, what advantaged groups decide is the norm in terms of values, attitudes and beliefs becomes the dominant view or discourse through which all notions of correct and incorrect ideas are debated – and those that are deemed incorrect notions, views or individuals continue to be marginalized. The activity below is an example of how the media, in particular, is a strong mouthpiece for those who want to perpetuate and further normalize particular dominant discourses.

Activity

In September 2006 the *Telegraph* newspaper ran an article entitled 'Mrs Chips takes orders for the school dinners run' about a group of mothers who were 'delivering fast food through a school's fence' to their children and the children of other families. They were described as 'using a supermarket trolley to make daily runs with fish and chips, pies, burgers, sandwiches and fizzy drinks from local takeaways'. The paper claimed that the parents were 'taking action because pupils are turning up their noses at what they describe as "overpriced, low-fat rubbish"'.
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14 ENSURING EVERY CHILD MATTERS

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The newspaper also suggested that local environmental health and educational officials had been contacted to establish whether this was actually hygienically safe and if the parents might require a licence to distribute food in this way. It was stated that 50 to 60 meals were being distributed to children in this way, each day. One of the mothers was quoted as saying: 'Food is cheaper and better at the local takeaways ... We just want to make sure the kids are properly fed. They don't enjoy the school food and the end result is that they are starving.'

The school claimed it was trying to serve 'healthier' foods, with increased opportunity to buy and eat fruit and vegetables and less fried food on offer. The head teacher was quote as saying: 'I'm stunned. What these two women are doing is unbelievable ... these mums want to effectively shorten the lives of their kids' (Stokes, 2006).

Having read this article:

- > What do you think about the mothers' behaviour?
- > Which particularly aspects of the article make you think in this way?

Now compare this to some quotes from the BBC's reporting of the same incident, and as you read them, think carefully about the language being used to report the incident.

The article was headlined 'School dinner row meeting held', and here is a direct quote: 'Parents who are opposed to the introduction of healthy meals at a South Yorkshire school have held a meeting with its deputy head teacher. Some parents of Rawmarsh Comprehensive pupils have been taking orders for fish and chips and delivering it through the fence at the Rotherham school.'

The BBC states that the parents felt they needed to do this because the children were not being given enough time to eat their meals, or enough choice in what was being served. They also said the children did not like the quality of the food. And the BBC reports the same mother as quoted in the newspaper article above as saying: 'she was receiving orders for healthy jacket potatoes and salad sandwiches as well as burgers and fish and chips'. And the head teacher is quoted as saying he would meet with the parents and that he saw 'the dialogue as it stands is really in terms of us persuading them of the effectiveness of the strategy we have put in place' (BBC, 2006).

- > Have your feelings about the mothers changed by reading a different version of events?

Also compare what actual words are used in both articles, in the *Telegraph's* version of the event, the parents are reported to use words like 'kids' and 'overpriced, low-fat rubbish', they turn up at the fence (not at the front gate, or in reception) with a supermarket trolley full of fish and chips, pies, burgers, sandwiches and fizzy drinks from local takeaways, while the school's concern is only for the health and safety of the children. How is the BBC's use of language different in their report the event?

- > Having compared the two versions of events, what can we learn about how the press can influence our views of ideas and events?

The issues raised by the theory of oppression are challenging to deal with, since they require us to reflect on those attitudes, beliefs and values that make up the very fabric of who we are. However, if we do not make some attempt to explore what we believe to be the case and what evidence we have for knowing we are correct, then we may be in danger of blindly accepting conditions under which we continue to oppress others, and allow ourselves to be oppressed, since we regard this as the normal and unchanging state of affairs (Adams et al., 2007: 11).

It is very hard to challenge accepted norms not only because of the personal internal conflict and uncertainty it can cause, but also because other members of the group might also challenge us or act with antagonism towards us. We often see this in groups, whether family groups, social groups or those we work or study with; there is often conflict when someone suggests a change in practice, or simply suggests doing something differently, even seemingly very minor things. Sometimes the suggestions for change comes from a group member, but more usually, particularly where we are concerned with wider issues of oppression, it is those who perceive themselves as being most oppressed who have the most to gain from trying to change things. In many instances this causes the greatest conflict as the oppressing group(s) may have the most incentive to maintain things as they are.

Activity

Think of the different groups you belong to and a time when you wanted to change something about the way the group went about things. Perhaps it was something as simple as wanting to move the furniture around in the bedroom, or to do with changing a process at work, or deciding what to do as a social event for a group of friends.

- Did you manage to make the changes you wanted?
- Did you encounter any opposition to your ideas?
- How did you deal with that opposition?
- If you could not make the changes you wanted, why was that?
- How was your change prevented from happening?
- How has the episode left you feeling?
- Will you give up on the change, or try again?

The groups we have most contact with, particularly as we are growing up, will have a considerable formative impact on our sense of self our values, attitudes and beliefs. While this may not be of too much significance in day-to-day terms, it becomes more important to consider what values attitudes and beliefs we are drawing on when we are working with children and their families, particularly if we are in a position where we have the power to make our beliefs and attitudes the dominant discourse – or at least behave if our understandings and assumptions are those that are held by everyone and understood by every-

16 ENSURING EVERY CHILD MATTERS

one. What we need to be aware of in all our work with children and their families is the *inequalities of social status and social position*, including the *differences in cultural contexts* that may exist between us, in our settings and schools and the children and families we are seeking to support. We need to be aware of the ways 'in which oppression and cultural context together' may lead to possible tensions between setting and schools and families, possibly, with the children caught in the middle (Adams et al., 2007: 17). Social justice is not about moving power from the oppressing group to the oppressed; it is about both groups, oppressed and oppressors working together to share power and goods in a way that benefits everyone concerned.

The ECM agenda seeks to provide for all children, young people and their families to achieve the five outcomes for well-being. Early years settings and primary schools are central to enabling this to happen, but if we are to fully understand our role in ensuring the ECM agenda provides what is intended for children and their families, we need to be clear about our own position in the hierarchy of oppression. If we do not listen to what others are saying about the support they need and how best they can access it and simply continue on as we have always done, then we will fail to connect with countless children and their families and be unable to realize the ECM agenda for them. It may come as a shock to consider ourselves as 'being oppressors', as we may actually think of ourselves as helping others, but we cannot do this unless we consult with them and act upon what they have to say. The principle is to work with children and families, not to make assumptions about what is best for them – neither is it expected that the management and organization of the setting or school will be 'handed over' to them.

If we consider the way settings and schools are organized, for example, generally the practitioners and teachers, led by the setting manager or head teacher and senior management team, make the decisions about how the organization is to be run – the level of input other people have in these decisions will vary from organization to organization. These decisions, often in the form of policy and practice are then passed on to others who are involved in the day-to-day running of the organization and in planning and undertaking the learning activities and processes that actually take place. It has been the dominant discourse that only those who hold recognized professional qualifications can be in the advantaged group that has the last say in decision-making and what information is passed on to others. Every Child Matters requires Early Years settings and schools to reflect on this position and work with the children, families and others involved in the organization, and to actively consult with them to ensure the settings and schools are meeting actual needs in appropriate ways, not simply making assumptions about needs or about how best to meet them.

To further explore how these dominant discourses, perpetuated by those in positions of advantage, can marginalize the very groups they are trying to help, let us take as an example the process of reading and learning to read. Settings and schools invest a lot of their resources, time, effort and money in encouraging chil-

dren and families to become involved in reading. Both the Early Years Foundation Stage framework and the National Curriculum are considerably focused on the processes and support children's need to become fluent readers and to read for pleasure as well as for practical reasons. By the time children reach primary school the National Curriculum states that children should read a range of literature that includes: 'stories, plays and poems by significant children's authors and: a range of modern fiction by significant children's authors and long-established children's fiction' (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 47/54). Research shows that teachers interpret this as being a fairly traditional diet of British 'classic' fiction texts and poems, and contemporary authors that reflect the teachers' background and 'interests with teachers relying on the same texts over a lengthy period' (OfSTED, 2005b). The research also shows that teachers' interpretation of the literature aspect of the National Curriculum reading programme of study does not reflect children's interests and encourage children to read for pleasure outside school (OfSTED, 2005b; 2005c). Indeed there is a 'dissonance between school reading and home reading choices and experiences' (OfSTED, 2005b: 9). Where children are given the opportunity to talk about what does influence what they read, most children cited friends as influences on their reading choices; 'fewer pupils mentioned that their reading had been influenced greatly by teachers' (OfSTED, 2005b: 24). Furthermore, those children who most experience this dissonance are boys and particularly boys from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minorities (OfSTED, 2005b; 2005c). This research (OfSTED, 2005b; 2005c) into children's reading habits showed that both boys and girls enjoyed reading comics and multi-modal texts for pleasure, neither of which are routinely used by many schools to engage children in reading; indeed, the children themselves said they thought teachers did not approve of comics (OfSTED, 2005b: 9). Here we have a good example of the dominant group – the teachers, deciding what it is best to use to encourage children to read and the subordinate group – or the oppressed group having what will actually encourage them to read at best ignored and at worst actively disapproved of. Comics are not inherently bad, and as a way of motivating children to read might be shown to be good. Yet unless the notion that it is wrong to let children read comics at school is challenged they will continue to be seen as bad and the dissonance between home and school, in terms of reading, for certain children, will continue to be there. The school's notion of what it is correct to read oppresses the home notion and in this way undermines the self-esteem of the child and family, who will learn to 'accept and incorporate negative images of themselves fostered by the dominant society' (Adams et al., 2007: 11) and the child cannot flourish in school and enjoy and achieve, if they believe the school denigrates what they and their family enjoy.

The reading example above is only one of many instances of how settings and schools have, in the past, used their position of privilege – in being the mouthpiece for unchallenged dominant discourses to continue to oppress certain groups in society, both through the language they use in communicating with children and parents and in their practices (Adams et al., 2007: 12). For example, in the 1970s and into the 1980s children for whom English was an Additional Language (EAL) were not 'allowed' to speak in anything other than English at

18 ENSURING EVERY CHILD MATTERS

school (Knowles, 2006: 61). For young children coming into school in Reception, an experience that was already challenging for some young children, to then be denied a language to communicate in and makes friends with further isolated the child. The same applied to older children who might be new to Britain and joined a school later in the primary phase. Without access to language to explain their needs, thoughts and feelings – or to talk to their friends – these children, now adults, speak of the fear and isolation they felt as children (Knowles, 2006: 61). Writing about her experiences of being a young Sikh girl new to Britain in the 1970s, the black educationalist and writer Vini Lander writes:

Immigrant children were not encouraged to maintain their mother tongue, the prevailing view being that it would impede the acquisition of English. As a child at that time, I remember my parents 'buying into' this and telling me to speak English at home. This was at the expense of reduced proficiency in Punjabi. I now speak Punjabi at a basic level but I am not literate in my mother tongue. (Knowles, 2006: 61)

While policy and practice with regard to children from whom EAL has moved on considerably since then, what is important to reflect on here is, the long-term harm done to all those children who were denied a language and how oppressed groups will accept the dominant discourses even to their own harm and disadvantage.

Case study

This case study considers the importance of listening to the child's voice as one that can be potentially oppressed to the point of being silenced.

A teaching assistant in a school on the coastal strip of south-east England had been given the responsibility of helping EAL children new to the school to settle in. Until recently the school had been mainly 'all white' and was feeling rather challenged by the need to support the increasing numbers of Eastern European children joining the school, whose first language was not English.

In reviewing the successes or otherwise of the school's practices the teaching assistant (TA) decided to talk to some of the children from Bulgaria and Poland as ask them about what had worked for them and what needed to be different for new children in the future.

Not only did the activity raise the self-esteem of the children, it also uncovered some huge gaps in the school's provision. The children said nobody showed them around the school, they did not know where the toilets were, they did not know who all the adults were – who was the head teacher, who were the teachers, teaching assistants and lunchtime supervisors – and they did not understand registration – they thought their names were being called because they had been naughty. They were convinced they had done something terrible when their name was read out in assembly from the 'golden book'.

From this experience, the school has developed a colour booklet and welcome pack for EAL children, available in a number of languages, so parents can talk through with their children what happens at school. The school has a system for training children to 'buddy' other children new to the school.



While many settings and schools have made huge strides in listening to children and families and finding ways to build supportive, reciprocal relationships with each other, rather than the setting or school taking the lead at all times, there is still a way to go before true partnerships are established. Many settings and schools are still guilty of sending home information that presupposes those receiving it can read, can read the information in the language it is written in and understand the terminology being used. To continue the reading example, many settings and schools send home information about the importance of reading to children, with children and listening to the children themselves reading. Sometimes the information can use quite technical terms, for example, phonics, phoneme, Early Years Foundation Stage, National Curriculum, programme of study, level of achievement. Even terms which seem quite common and obvious to those who deal with them every day, like fiction, non-fiction, story books or sharing a book, may be alien terms to other groups. Therefore, by using only the terminology of the group 'in charge', other, more marginalized, groups can be made to feel inferior if they do not know what these terms mean. Even if the setting or school puts on events to explain these terms and to model what is meant by some of them, they need to give consideration to when parents can actually come to such meetings and how are they going to deal sensitively with those parents who can not read?

Activity

Hopefully what you have read so far has caused you to reflect on some of your own values, attitudes and beliefs, and where you have collected them from and how use operate with them in your relationships with others – or how you let them influence what you are prepared to accepted in terms of others' behaviours towards you. Beginning to think through where we have 'come from' and how we unthinkingly fall back on our values, attitudes and beliefs in our day-to-day lives can be quite a challenging experience. Using some of the starting points below, you can begin to reflect on what you believe, what values and attitudes you hold, and how comfortable you feel with them.

Personal journey maps – draw a 'map' of your personal journey that shows how you have arrived at where you are today. 'Signpost' those things that helped you on your journey and those things that 'got in the way'. Try to identify particular events, times and places in you map, when you met particular people who had a strong influence on who you are today. Are there any times in your life where particular people or events significantly changed the way you looked at things?

Stopping and thinking about your own values, attitudes and beliefs the next time you are going to share your views on something, or give an opinion, think, why do I believe that/how do I know I am correct? Do I have anything to 'back up' my views?

Trying out others suggestions – the next time somebody suggests doing something differently, try going along with them, even if you have some reservations. If this is too challenging, say 'OK, we'll try that, but if I don't like it, or it isn't working for me, I reserve the right to stop doing it'.

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You might also like to try some of the ideas below

Looking at things from different points of view – try reading newspapers you do not usually buy, or watching television programmes on topics and channels that you had not previously considered watching (including international programmes, if you can). What do you notice about the different ways the same incidents are reported?

Visit the BBC voices website – personal stories and accounts can be very powerful in making us think about things in a different way. The website, www.bbc.co.uk/voices/, contains personal stories from all sorts of people, across all aspects of society. Try visiting the website and listening to some of the stories, perhaps those told by people you do not have the opportunity to meet in your day-to-day life. See how their experiences have influenced their attitudes, values and beliefs; what are the similarities and differences between your story and theirs?

Social justice in the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage and the National Curriculum

Not only is the ECM agenda underpinned by the notion of social justice, but it is also a requirement that children are taught the principles of the concept too. The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the National Curriculum (NC) do not mention the notion of social justice by name. However, the principles that underpin both documents and aspects of the learning areas and subjects they cover are, in essence, those which explore social justice issues. The subjects most specifically related to tackling social justice issues are those of personal, social and emotional development and citizenship, all of which occur by name or in some form in the EYFS and the NC. Further to this, since the notion of social justice has come to be more widely discussed in society, the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) – now the Department for Children, Families and Schools – published additional curriculum guidance for Early Years (EY) settings and schools, which does use the term social justice, for example, the DfES (2005) document *Developing the Global Dimension in the School Curriculum*.

In exploring social justice as a principle of the NC, *Developing the Global Dimension in the School Curriculum* states:

‘Education influences and reflects the values of society, and the kind of society we want to be ... Education is ... a route to equality of opportunity for all, a healthy and just democracy, a productive economy, and sustainable development. Education should reflect the enduring values that contribute to these ends. These include valuing ... the wider groups to which we belong, the diversity in our society and the environment in which we live. (DfES, 2005: 6)

The document goes on to explore for Early Years practitioners and teachers how one of the principles that underpins the EYFS framework is one that helps children work towards understanding 'social justice' (DfES, 2005: 4). It states, children should begin to understand the concept of social justice as it is about:

- > understanding the importance of equality, justice and fairness for all within and between societies;
- > recognising the impact of unequal power and access to resources;
- > appreciating that actions have both intended and unintended consequences on people's lives and appreciating the importance of informed choices;
- > developing the motivation and commitment to take action that will contribute to a more just world;
- > challenging racism and other forms of discrimination, inequality and injustice. (DfES, 2005: 21)

The document discusses ways in which children in the EY, and then through the primary years, can be introduced to the concept of social justice and associated issues can be explored through day-to-day learning activities. Some of the ideas present in the document are outline in the activities below.

Activity

Teaching social justice in the early years

In encouraging very young children to begin to engage with the concept of social justice, the DfES suggests That young children can begin to explore their 'relationships to others to the different communities that they are part of, for example, family, setting, school and other groups and activities they might be part of'. And through this they 'begin to develop an awareness of the diversity of peoples, places, cultures, languages and religions. They begin to understand fairness, the need to care for other people and the environment, and to be sensitive to the needs of others' (DfES, 2005: 9).

If you are keen to try some of these ideas, a place to start might be through a personal, social and emotional development learning activity, or though a communication, language and literacy activity where:

- > Children consider people in particular situations and whether they might be happy, sad, hungry or lonely – using pictures and photographs.
- > Children look at photos of other children from around the world and discuss what needs we all have such as love, a home, friends, food, water, security and shelter.
- > Children listen to and talk about stories from around the world and on topics such as fairness and the environment. (DfES, 2005: 10)

Activity **Teaching social justice in the early years****Teaching social justice in the primary phase (5–11 years of age)**

As children grow-up they deepen their understanding of their own sense of self and how they have a part to play in the wider world. They learn that everyone has the same basic needs, but that there are differences in the way that these needs are met. They deepen their understanding about the similarities and differences between people and places around the world 'and about disparities in the world. They develop their sense of social justice and moral responsibility and begin to understand that their own choices can affect global issues, as well as local ones' (DfES, 2005: 9)

Activities you might try with children between the ages of 5 and 7 could be a literacy activity that provides the opportunity for children to engage in speaking and listening activities discussing fiction or non-fiction texts 'about people, places and cultures in other countries' (DfES, 2005: 10), exploring ideas of similarities and differences in lifestyle and culture. For example, by saying:

'Now we have read about X let's think about y:
 What do we do/have, that X does/has too?
 What do we play with/visit, that X does?
 What things do we like that X does?
 What things are different about X and our lives?
 Why do you think things are different in Z for X?'

An activity to try with older children (8–11) in a literacy sessions, might be around reading: 'stories, poetry and texts drawn from a variety of cultures and traditions such as diaries, autobiographies, newspapers and magazines, all of which can include the global dimension' (DfES, 2005: 11). Again, through well-focused speaking and listening activities, including group discussion and drama, the children can be encouraged to 'engage in discussions and debates about topical issues and use drama to explore the experiences of others' (DfES, 2005: 11).

Further reading 

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2008) Working together: listening to the voices of children and young people. DCSF/0041/2008.

DfES (2003) 'Sustainable development action plan for education and skills' ????????

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2004) 'Putting the world into world-class education: an international strategy for education, skills and children's services' (DfES/1077/2004).

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2004) 'Working together: giving children and young people a say' (DfES/0134/2004).



Useful websites

www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/teachers/catalogue.htm

www.unicef.org.uk/teacherzone

www.dfid.gov.uk

www.citizenship-global.org.uk

www.geography.org.uk/global

www.globaldimension.org.uk

www.qca.org.uk/respectforall

