



Children, childhood and political participation: Case studies of young people's councils

MICHAEL WYNESS

Park Campus, University College Northampton, Northampton, UK

Introduction

In the past 10 years or so, there has been the steady if desultory build up of structures that involve children and young people in political decision-making processes. We have had a European Youth Parliament since the mid 1990s. At a national level there are youth parliaments in countries as diverse as New Zealand (McClay, 1996) the Caribbean (Miller, 1992) and Scotland. Elections took place late last year for the UK Youth Parliament. And across Europe cities and towns are developing political structures that incorporate the voices of those under the age of 18 (Casman, 1996). In this paper I want to examine political inclusion at this latter more localised level by drawing on case studies of children and young people's political involvement within local political structures. The analysis is informed by the concepts children's 'needs' and children's 'interests' (Qvortrup, 1994). In the first part of the paper political inclusion and by implication exclusion, will be grounded in terms of a tension between needs and interests, which in structural terms pulls children in different directions. I will argue, that exclusion is based on a dominant needs discourse of childhood whilst children's political inclusion depends largely on the more radical notion of children's collective interests.

This brief theoretical discussion leads into the analysis of four cases of political inclusion: two from India and two from England. The rationale here is based on Hart's (1997) argument that children's participative structures are more developed in developing than developed countries. I will look briefly at two notable examples from India where children have been able to mobilise themselves effectively as a group in order to promote both their economic and political interests. I then go on to examine my own data from two English case studies of young people's involvement in local politics in England. Whilst there are clear cultural differences between the Indian and English cases, there are some significant common threads running through in terms of levels

of representation and in the way that each case is used to influence adult thinking around childhood.

Children's needs and children's interests

Children's relationship to the political world in western cultures has traditionally been a marginal one. In almost all European and North American countries voting is a political right enjoyed by those over the age of 18. With one or two exceptions children are not represented at the political centre. Children and young people themselves are rarely given the opportunity to participate in agenda setting and the political establishment rarely seeks their views. This exclusion accords with the notion that the 'political child' is seen as the 'unchild', a counter-stereotypical image of children that does not fit with the norms of childhood (Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers, 1992, pp. 32–33). The grounds for this exclusion are cultural and have been the subject of much debate within childhood studies (James and Prout, 1997). I will argue that any lack of political status is rooted in children's lack of social status. I will discuss the latter in terms of the dominant notion of children's 'needs'.

The discourse on children's 'needs' implies two deficit models of the child. First there are problem children suffering from various levels of neglect and abuse. The problem of child abuse, for example, is suffused with the language of needs: in a variety of ways, for example, the neglected child's emotional, physical and social needs are not being met by their parents and can arguably be better met by others (Woodhead, 1997). 'Children's needs' here becomes a discursive means through which various adult groups struggle for resources and professional expansion (See Parton, 1996 for an account of this). A second deficit model of the child is more pervasive, arguably a built-in feature of modern western social structures. Here the comparison is not made within the child population, between say, problem and normal children. The incomplete child is compared with the fully functioning, ontologically established adult. Children's needs here are generalised to the whole child population. Childhood is seen as a form of apprenticeship which, at least in Western societies, is characterised as a transitional phase. During this period children's needs are met as they steadily work through various stages of development towards adulthood and citizenship. In an important sense, children are apprentice citizens, rather than fully constituted members of the social world (Cockburn, 1998). Children's lack of ontology rules them out from being viewed as fully 'social'. Full social status implies citizenship. Both are preconditions for political participation. Children are judged to arrive at a point of political maturity at around the time they are supposed to be able

to take advantage of the social, political and economic benefits and at the same time cope with the moral and social obligations of being a citizen. In other words, children are recognised as citizens around the time they leave childhood.

To put this idea of social apprenticeship another way, membership of a political community is based on the idea of a social contract. Membership is granted on the basis that any rights to participate and have a voice in the running of an institution or the governing of a territory bring with them obligations or responsibilities. Much of recent political debate in Britain and North America revolves around the precise nature of the relationship between rights and obligations. But it now seems to be taken as read that both elements are required within a democratic polity (Roche, 1992). Notions of respect, trust and tolerance are built into a network of mutual obligations such that the individual's political and social rights are intimately bound up with their obligations to the wider society. Children do not figure within this network of mutual obligations. The child's lack of status equates with the child not having a stake in society; to use the current political jargon in Britain, children are not 'stakeholders'. This is partly bound up with the privatisation of childhood, the general trend towards viewing children as part of the private realm of intimacy, emotion and family. Their lack of status is also due to their imputed incompetence, children's inability to take moral or social responsibility. This becomes the basis for adults to act and talk on children's behalf. Adults assume the responsibilities that would be attributed to children were they to be recognised as citizens. Drawing on David Archard's (1993, pp. 51–57) 'caretaker thesis', we come back to the idea of needs. The physical, moral and social needs of children are the responsibility of adult caretakers rather than the children themselves. Adults ensure that children receive a range of common goods that support their physical and social development. This, in effect, limits the extent to which children are in a position to contract in to these arrangements, have some say in their own welfare.

'Children's needs' suggests that adults provide for and think for children. Adults always mediate children's worlds. It is thus difficult to think of children as political actors. The idea of children's interests, on the other hand, takes children as the primary reference point. Children, as it were, mediate themselves. We can locate this 'self-mediation' within a developing research agenda that recognises children and young people as competent actors in a variety of social contexts (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). Research on childhood since the mid 1990s in UK, has concentrated on, among other things, children's influence in employment, the urban environment and their roles as welfare agents (ESRC 5-16 project, 1996) Children's political competence is yet to be fully explored here. The idea of children's interests

will hopefully add another dimension to this field of research. 'Interests' is a quintessentially political concept. Members of a social group find themselves in similar situations with respect to a governing or superior political class. Their common interests push them into a separate social category. The notion of children's 'interests' then implies a degree of separateness from 'non-child' groups in society and the construction of channels through which this separateness can be articulated. Unlike the politics of children's 'needs' where children are ironically absent, 'interests' suggests agency in that children are viewed as active and involved, a group or body in a position to make claims on the state at various levels.

Children's rights

At this point it might be worth referring briefly to the children's rights discourse that parallels needs/interests. A casual perusal of the 'children's rights' literature reveals a conflict between children's rights to *welfare* and their rights to *self-determination* (Freeman, 1983; Franklin and Franklin, 1996). For the former strengthens the hold that adults have over children because it works on the assumption that those in authority have an obligation to ensure that these rights to health care, education and protection are met on children's behalf. The latter, on the other hand, are far more controversial. Rights to self-determination take certain responsibilities and powers away from adults since children have a right to make decisions for themselves that could potentially go against adults' claims that they are acting in the child's 'best interests'. These kinds of children's rights do threaten the protective and paternalist roles of adults. Rights to welfare are bound up with idea of needs in that adults take control of child's welfare bringing the child 'in need' up to a global standard of normality and assumes that things are done to, for and on behalf of the normal child. Rights to self-determination, on the other hand, can be associated with children's interests in that they underpin demands children make to be heard.

There is no necessary prejudging of the substance of these demands. Paradoxically, 'children's interests' often consists of pressing adults to meet their needs. Where interests have been articulated it is quite often children making demands on adults to provide adequate guidance and protection. The case of South African children in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising is instructive here. Black South African children became heavily involved in the struggle against apartheid after the 1976 uprising. Njabulo Ndebele (1995) refers to the slogan 'Liberation now, education later' as a popular expression of this involvement, with children forced to prioritise political participation over their schooling. Children got caught up in the political struggle due to the overtly racist nature of the education system in South

Africa. Ndebele talks of the young rejecting adult authority and in some cases attempting to run schools themselves. Children took control here because their educational interests were perceived by the children to be neglected by the adult population. Ndebele refers more generally to the breakdown in adult/child relations with adults unable or unwilling to offer children guidance and support. Adult/child conflict here revolves around both children's needs and interests. Children are in a position to make demands on the adult population: political space has been found through which children are able to articulate their interests. At the same time children's interests are framed around a deficit needs model of childhood with adults being enjoined by children to reassert their educational and caring responsibilities. The point I want to make here is not that children make claims on the state, the school or the family to maintain a conception of childhood that privileges adults over children. What is significant is that children are in a position to make these claims in the first place. Irrespective of the substance of these claims children are in a different position with regards to their ability to be heard and taken seriously.

Global context

International opinion on children has been informed by the problems of child poverty, child labour and child abuse with a concomitant gravitational pull towards children's needs. In relation to child 'labour', for example, media coverage in the west has concentrated on children being exploited in 'Third World sweatshops' (*The Observer*, 7th November 1999, p. 13). Economic and moral arguments are deployed in comparing the deficient status of child labourers in Nepal and Venezuela with the way that compulsory full-time education meets the developmental needs of the majority of children from developed countries. Just as with UNCRC, some account is taken of indigenous cultural norms. For example, the aforementioned newspaper article goes on: 'Surveys in Nicaragua and Mali have suggested that children in rural areas accept work as part of normal life and enjoy the company, if they are not forced into heavy labour or beaten' (*op. cit.*). Yet the broad thrust of media coverage has been to attack child labour *per se*: to expose the exploitation of child labourers and emphasise their needs in terms of schooling. Drawing on the language of rights, there is a strong tendency towards child saving with children's rights to provision and protection, having priority over their rights to participation.

There is a general consensus within academic and legal circles that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a crucial step forward in establishing a social ontology for children (Franklin and Franklin 1996, Lansdown 2000). Nevertheless the convention is shot

through with ambiguity. Article 12, (see Box 1) the most celebrated child-centred clause, couches the child's right to be heard and have their interests articulated, in terms of the individual child's competence.¹ 'Giving due weight' in effect means that children's agency is in the hands of responsible adults (Lee, 1999). Parents, teachers and other adults with authority are to make judgements on a child's abilities before children can make any claims. Articles 13 to 15 merit at least equal attention. Children's right to information, right to be heard and worship and the right to form their own social groupings in theory expand children's social frames of reference because it treats them as independent social actors capable of acting together. These articles have implications for their schooling, their home life and their leisure time. Yet these child-centred innovations need to be set against the imposition of a more westernised conception of the childhood with the biological family and compulsory schooling as the 'natural' settings for children rather than more variegated kin and community networks and workplaces (Stephens, 1995; Boydon and Myers, 1995). With reference to politics it is worth noting that the drafters of the convention justified children's political exclusion in a briefing paper on the grounds that 'the very status of a child means in principle that the child has no political rights' (cited in John, 1995, p. 106).

Box 1

Extracts for the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child

: States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (Article 12)

: The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers . . . (Article 13)

: States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. (Article 14)

: States Parties recognise the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly. (Article 15)

Other less child-focused UN pronouncements offer more possibilities in terms of children's interests. Local Agenda 21, a blue print on the global environment was drawn up as a result of the United Nations Conference

¹ In the U.K. a pressure group named Article 12 was formed to further children's rights to self-determination. See Franklin and Franklin, 1996, pp. 105–107.

on Environment and Development of 1992. One chapter entitled 'Children and Youth in Sustainable Development' (chapter 25) deals with 'children and youth' as a significant political community: 'Governments should take measures to establish procedures allowing for consultation and possible participation of youth of both genders, by 1993, in decision-making processes with regard to the environment involving youth at the local national and regional levels'. Agenda 21 stipulates that national governments should establish procedures to incorporate children's concerns into all relevant policies and strategies for environment and development at the local, regional and national levels' (<http://soc-info.soc.titech.ac.jp/ngo/agenda21/ch-25>).

At the European level very little has been set up for those under the age of 15 (Stalford, 2000). In part this is due to longstanding tensions between EC social policy makers and the national sovereignty concerns of some member states. What has been done relates more to children's needs rather than their interests. Social policy at this level is protectionist in nature with resources being directed towards tackling child exploitation through sex tourism and child pornography. Having said this, a report commissioned by the European Union calls for a substantive European children's policy. The author of the report, Sandy Ruxton (1999) is quite clear in positioning children as separate political entities: child-focused issues are to be dealt with in their own terms rather than subsumed within either 'family, youth or gender policy' (1999, p. 2). The report emphasises the need to improve children's political status and sets out a range of proposals from the general: 'the extension of citizenship and participation' and giving 'children the right to participate in the democratic process' (1999, *preface*), to the more specific such as the reduction of the age of majority to 16 in member countries.

Children's political participation – case studies

Whether we are talking about children's needs or interests, the global context acts as a significant backdrop for child-focused initiatives at more localised levels. The rest of the paper is taken up with localised initiatives that set out to strengthen the position of children vis-a-vis the political realm. Children's interests here revolve around 4 concepts: mobilisation, participation, influence and representation. Children's interests need to be successfully *mobilised* in organisational terms. This means that children need to *participate*, get involved in political structures where they can exert a degree of *influence* over decisions at both individual and general levels. This involves children having a voice in decisions that directly affect them as individuals. This is more likely to happen where children are in a position to influence the way that they are received and perceived by the adult population. Finally,

mobilisation, participation and influence tend to be filtered through groups who represent the interests of young people. In organisational terms we can view interests in terms of levels of *representation*.

Working children's union activities: Bhima Sangha

Bhima Sangha was set up by child workers in the Indian city of Bangalore in an attempt to strengthen their lowly economic and social positions. Organised action and political voice are features of the adult population particularly with respect to the workplace. Bhima Sangha act on one of the fundamentals of economic and political life, that individual workers need to group together collectively in an effort to articulate and improve their economic positions.² Whilst economic, social and political circumstances now make this a hazardous and arduous process in the contemporary adult world, Bhima Sangha has grown in size and influence and now represents the interests of 16,000 children in the Indian state of Karnataka (Reddy, 2000, p. 53).

The union activists and their members here have three clear sets of interests. First, there is the issue of exploitation and the need to promote the interests of child workers inherently economically vulnerable. The fragmented location of child workers, the sometimes hidden nature of their activities, and the temporary, part-time and seasonal nature of their work puts them in a very weak bargaining position with reference to controlling the work process, their rates of pay and their general working conditions. A second issue relates to the very idea of child work. The general political trend at global and to some extent national levels is to get children off the street and into families and schools.³ Thus Bhima Sangha is challenging the popular idea that child labourers are at best always going to be exploited because of their 'childish' natures, and at worst are children 'out of position'. As Nandana Reddy (2000, p. 52) argues, the union is heavily involved in both abolishing the worst excesses of employer exploitation *and* "preserving and increasing the benefits" of children working. Children's interests are strengthened in a third way. Child work gives children and by implication their families a degree of financial freedom. It also importantly gives female child workers a degree of social freedom to meet other girls, which by convention they would ordinarily be denied.

² There is no historical precedent being set here. Corsaro (1997) for example, refers to the way that late 19th century American child newspaper vendors, the 'Newsies', formed a union to counter their employers cutting their wages.

³ The Indian government, for example, is ambivalent in its support for anti-child labour policies. Their position is that compulsory education, which would succeed child labour, can only be realistically considered once the most serious poverty has been reduced (Boyden and Myers, 1995).

There are here elements of participation, mobilisation, influence and representation. The union has specific economic concerns. But one important spin-off is the potential to shift general, possibly even international, opinion on child workers as well as alter more localised perceptions of the position of young females.

Bal Sansad – children's parliament

A second case study concerns the Bal Sansad, a children's parliament based in Rajasthan, one of the poorest and largest states in North West India. In 1993 a local social work centre (SWRC) set up the Bal Sansad with three aims which correspond very closely to the notion of children's interests: to get children more involved in local politics, to give children decision-making powers in areas that directly affect them, and to encourage the population 'to respect children's opinions and capabilities' (Bernard van Leer, 1999, p. 1). There is an important educational role in that children are being prepared for responsible adult positions in their respective villages. There is also an emphasis on them becoming aware of "their rights as equal members" (1999, p. 1). Children aged between 6 and 14 become members of parliament (MP) by being directly elected by their peers. The electorate consists of around 1700 children with between 15 and 20 MPs elected. The current parliament, for instance, consists of 5 boys and 11 girls. The SWRC mediates between the electorate (acting as a 'civil service' according to Parry-Williams, 1998, p. 33) and the elected providing training courses and general support from those with little experience of the political process. The Bal Sansad involves a degree of political partisanship with the electorate being able to choose from two competing parties, Ujala, which means Light and Gauval, which means Shepherd. Both have their own logos. Prospective candidates can choose to join either party.

A lengthy election process takes place culminating in votes being cast by secret ballot. Representatives from both parties oversee the count of votes with problems being dealt with by an election commissioner. The party with the largest number of votes forms the government. Parliament meets on a monthly basis. Government is directly accountable to parliament with the appointed Prime Minister having to account for her actions to MPs of both sides (the current prime minister is a 13 year old girl). Ministers are appointed and are expected to attend all parliamentary sittings. Sanctions are imposed on those who fail to attend. Regular contact is kept between the ministers, the MPs and children from the local communities.

One of the primary concerns of the M.Ps is the provision of schooling. As with the pupils in South Africa, children have some influence here in both persuading parents and children of the benefits of schooling and dealing with

problems such as the poor attendance of teachers and safety issues relating to children's school attendance. In the latter case, the Bal Sansad put pressure on a local 'liquor lord' to close down one of his shops which was situated directly across from a local school (Indian Express, 1999).

The Bal Sansad also has an important mobilising function in organising local children's collective interests. It brings children together from different villages where common issues and problems are collectively expressed and dealt. Moreover, the origins of Bal Sansad are in the work that SWRC did with children attending night school. The initial focal points were therefore school related. Work with the parliament over time has enlarged children's concerns to all aspects of village life. This has meant that elected representatives of Bal Sansad now take an active role in adult bodies. Finally, like Bhima Sangha, Bal Sansad MPs are trying to change the attitudes of the adult population. One important issue that the Bal Sansad regularly faces is lack of support from some groups of parents. MPs from both parties often mediate here with some success. In particular, through the work of the MPs, some 'orthodox' parents are now allowing their daughters to go to school and take part in elections.

English young people's town councils

Before going on to examine the town councils, it is worth saying a little more about the English context. In recent years there has been some consideration given to the voice of young people at local government level, not least because of the aforementioned global initiatives such as Agenda 21 and the UN convention. At the same time there have also been attempts by central government to regenerate civic life through programmes of urban and democratic renewal. This has focused attention on the possibilities for the political inclusion of previously marginalised groups such as the disabled, the elderly and the young (Local Government Information Unit, 2000). A national U.K. youth parliament is being set up and at regional level there has been an explosion of interest in youth organisations ranging from ad hoc youth groups that meet on the street to more formally constituted young people's town councils. Some are more established and formalised than others but the general aim is to strengthen young people's voice in local matters. The two English councils discussed here are part of a research project that examines children and young people's representation in 4 geographical areas at local government and school levels.⁴ Methods of research consist of (a) group and individual interviews with young councillors, local authority personnel,

⁴ The project, 'Young people, citizenship and political participation: comparative case studies of young people's councils' is currently funded by British Academy.

adult councillors and teachers and (b) non-participant observation of council meetings. For the purposes of this paper I am drawing on data from two of the areas focusing on children's representation at local government level. As fieldwork is still underway, data here from the study are illustrative and provisional.

Smithston Student Borough Council (SBSC) and Baston Young People's Town Council (BYPTC) were formed in the early 1990s. Both councils are modeled on the well-established, Association Nationale des Conseils d'Enfants et des Jeunes (ANACEJ) found in French towns.⁵ As with the French model there is a degree of shadowing of adult councils going on. As we shall see this is more pronounced with SBSC, yet the emphasis in both cases is on political representation, and the setting of meetings and procedures follows pretty closely the activities of the adult councils. For example, meetings take place in the council chambers, the setting for the adult councils, agendas are sent out in advance to members by adult council officers, minutes are taken at the meetings by council officials, issues are formally proposed and votes are taken on key decisions made.

Smithston Borough Student Council (SBSC)

In turning to the first town council in Smithston, a medium sized town, the shadowing is more structured and formal. The council is made up of 24 members, 4 from each of the 6 secondary schools in the area. Years 9 and 10 (ages 13–15) provide the council with 4 members elected from both years per school. As with the Bal Sansad elections are an important characteristic of SBSC. In the six feeder secondary schools candidates for council office put themselves forward and present their policies to their school year group. After a period of canvassing elections take place on a given day normally coordinated across the six schools. The councillors are elected for 2 years and then have to stand down. The rationale for this age group is both strategic and pragmatic. The general feeling among councillors and relevant adults is that youth groups tend to be over-represented by those aged 16 and over. The council thus gives those in their early teens a chance to participate and have some influence over local issues. A second reason relates to the structure of the curriculum. From age 15 onwards pupils are working towards their formal school qualifications, GCSEs and 'A' levels. The schools felt that the elections and the twice termly council meetings, which took place during school time, would compromise their studies during this period. Thus the schools in conjunction with the adult council decided to target a younger age group with relatively fewer exam commitments.

⁵ See Matthews and Limb (1998) for a review of the French model.

Baston Young People's Town Council (BYPTC)

In Baston council membership is much more informally constituted with councillors becoming members once they express an interest in the council. Prospective councillors are invited to attend two meetings as non-participating members. They can then confirm their interest and in consultation with the rest of the councillors become full members. Whilst elections have always been an option for the councillors there are pragmatic reasons for members being 'selected' rather than elected. Council membership has varied in size since its inception in 1992. Geography is significant here. Baston secondary school is one of two secondary schools in Baston, a small town within a rural county in the South West of England. Unlike Smithston, which draws its members from 6 local schools, Baston relies on a much smaller catchment area, which limits the numbers of children coming forward. As the advisor to the council comments: "the reality is that youngsters don't fall out of the trees wanting to join this sort of council and if they don't you can't have elections. If we had enough people coming forward we'd have elections." The optimum number of councillors is around 16 with membership normally between 11 and 15. This lack of formal structure allows interested students to join from across the secondary school age span for as long as they maintain an interest in the council. The current crop of councillors are aged between 12 and 17 with several of the older members having been councillors for 4 years.

The councils are constituted quite differently, particularly in the ways in which they represent their respective constituencies. However, there are some common themes running through the accounts given by both sets of councillors, particularly in the way that they articulate their roles as councillors. Some students mentioned the council as a preparation for the adult world: as a means of developing their self-confidence and powers of expression, some even mentioned filling out their curricula vitae. There was as it were, a degree of 'self-interest'. At the same time in the group interviews the councillors articulated the significance of the councils in terms of two key aspects of a broader 'children's and young people's interests' discourse: representation and influence.

Representation

First of all, formal documentation emphasises the representative position of one of the councils. For example, from the SBSC constitution one of the key aims is

to represent young people in the Borough, to comment on public services, in particular those that impinge on the lives of young people, and to

initiate discussion with service providers on the development or changes to public services (Members' Handbook, p. 7).

The councillors were keen to confirm their roles in representing the interests of young people at some level. In some cases this was quite general with a focus on students and young people.

I think it's to get across students' views because it's always normally adults saying what they want all the time and kids don't get a say what they want. So it's really just to say what we want and if anything gets done about it which does now, now we've got this (the council) (Lindsay, year 9 SBSC).

I heard it might be something that I'd enjoy and something that I believed in that young people's views should be heard rather than just the older members of the area voting on what they believed (James, year 9, SBSC).

Some councillors were more specific when discussing the aims of the council, referring to either the locale or their age-related electorate.

To provide better things for students around the Smithston borough. To make their voices heard and just generally bring up any issues they want to get heard and try and resolve them (Andrew, year 10, SBSC).

I wanted to have a say for our age group, what we could do in Smithston (Emily, year 10, SBSC).

Similarly from Baston where the constituency was narrower:

The main aim is to make life better in Baston and to give the youth of Baston a voice so instead of just sitting back and saying I don't like that and positive whining (John, aged 13, BYPTC).

Representation was not simply a matter of expressing the views of young people twice a term at council meetings. There is a degree of involvement at most levels of the adult council structure. A cursory glance at both councils' agendas indicates that the young councillors have representative roles in virtually all adult forums and committees. The adviser to BYPTC endorses this.

We have someone who represents the council on the civic society, they have someone who represents the council on that body, they have someone who represents the council on the crime prevention panel, they have someone who represents the council on the amenities committee of the main council. We've had members of YPTC leading a march about

them. So as a result of these activities it has that level of integration. I was talking to the Mayor recently about there's going to be an opening of a new road that was lobbied. She had to make sure that the representatives of the YPTC were invited to the opening and she was all for it but she would have to persuade the county council who seem to be a bit sniffy about involving the youngsters.

The councillors were also asked about how representative they thought their roles were. There were mixed responses. Given that the councillors' constituencies are determined by school age gradings albeit much broader age-gradings at Baston, many of the issues picked up by councillors work their way through informal networks. On the positive side their peers will ask them to bring up specific problems.

If we're coming up to a meeting, I have a word with some of my mates 'is there anything on the bus passes?' We keep bringing them up at meetings. The big problem is they ask say the Odeon cinema to come in and we've been asking them for a year and they haven't turned up (James, year 10, SBSC).

Someone came up to me with an idea for an anti-pollution initiative in Baston. Which means like getting posters up and spreading the idea of that we should walk instead of drive into the town centre, so I have actually started up an anti-pollution initiative with that idea and that person has subsequently joined the council (John, aged 13, BYPTC).

On the other hand, some of the younger councillors are critical of the older councillors' 'self-interests'. A couple of first year councillors were asked about how the council could be improved.

I don't know. I think maybe the older councillors should probably go out and talk to people more rather than they seem to put their own views forward more (Hayley and Janine, year 9, SBSC).

At Smithston where representation worked its way through six schools within a much broader and variegated area, there were more bureaucratic mechanisms for student voice.

M.W.: Do you think that the council gives young people in Baston more of a say?

Alan: Yes it does because by having it from every school, having four from every school you do get the view of Smithston and the surrounding area because people in my school tell me stuff that they want sorting like the bus problems and all that.

M.W.: So you do get people coming up to you saying you're the student councillor?

Alan: Yeah, we can then bring it up in any other business and we can put it in the agenda for next time,
(Year 10, SBSC)

Influence

The issue of influence is also a significant feature of the councillors' accounts of their roles. When discussing both Bhima Sangha and Bal Sansad I made reference to the way that child members were trying to change local adult opinion on their capabilities as children. With respect to the English councils the influence that young people aim to have here over the adult population is couched in terms of challenging a needs model of childhood discussed earlier, the assumption that children necessarily have to be kept in line by adult authority figures.

At the time there wasn't a lot for teenagers to do and they were always criticised, stereotyped, so I just wanted to, if everyone was complaining about having nothing to do and they hadn't heard of the student council, so I thought that I could go forward and put their points of views forward (Alan, year 9, SBSC).

This comment suggests that the SBSC is challenging a contemporary but historically recurring theme within British culture, the 'problem of youth'. This manifests itself in terms of the perennial links made between truancy and delinquency and the more recent 'demonisation of childhood'.⁶ In both cases young people are spatially and culturally 'out of place', generating demands for more surveillance of young people particularly within the public realm.

One instance of SBSC trying to change attitudes came up at a council meeting. Representatives from the local bus companies involved in transporting pupils to schools within the borough were invited to attend. There had been several recurring problems with school transport, among others, the safety of pupils on the buses, the poor physical state of the buses and the attitudes of the bus drivers. During the meeting the bus company representatives were ushered into the meeting at the appropriate point on the agenda and the councillors set out the problems as they saw them. With reference to the issues of safety, the condition of the buses and drivers' attitudes, they presented anecdotal evidence of incidents that had taken place and set out the general perception that pupils had of the way they were treated by the drivers. Many of the claims made by councillors were countered by bus representatives asserting the state of the buses and the 'strict' attitude of the drivers

⁶ For more background to this see Franklin and Petley (1996), Wyness (2000).

was due to lack of respect that many young people had for the company's property resulting often in the buses being vandalised. The councillors were courteous in their manner and organised and articulate in putting their points across. Yet, the message from the bus companies seemed to be, if the young people want respect they have to earn it. I interviewed some of the councillors a couple of weeks after this meeting. Some felt that the important thing was to make their point which, they felt they had done. Others were more critical referring to the 'youth as problem' stereotype

M.W.: What do you think of that debate that you had with the bus companies?

Lindsay: I disliked some of their attitudes. A lot of adults see the council as just some little organisation, which shouldn't actually do anything.

James: I find them patronising. I felt patronised at one point. It really annoyed me because they were talking down on me because I was a kid or something.

Lindsay: That's the problem, some adults don't actually have much respect for us. All they see is a bunch of teenagers sitting around shouting.

BYPTC challenged the 'youth as problem' theme from a slightly different angle. The councillors were very sensitive about naming their council a 'Young People's' Council rather than a 'Youth' Council.

Derek: One of the first things I suppose was the actual naming of the council because we could . . . for instance, if I said youth to you what would you think of? Describe 'youth' to me?

M.W.: Well basically 'youth' would be slightly older probably than a child, probably between the ages of 15 and 21–22. But I think the point you're trying to make is, if you use the term youth it generates an idea of young people hanging around streets.

Derek: Yes, that's part of it. Whereas if I was to say young adult would that conjure up a different view?

M.W.: It would be young people as well wouldn't it?

Derek: Yes which was partly why we choose 'Young People's Town Council' because we had a lot of people referring to us as Youth Town Council and I believe I did actually chew somebody else for that.

M.W.: Why not 'student council'?

John: It makes you think of school age pupils and they're learning. They don't know these things that's why they're learning, whereas young people sounds much more . . . It's like image.

M.W.: There are lots of 'youth councils'

Derek: They don't realise how foolish they are

M.W.: Is that why it was chosen then?

Derek: Oh yes. To me it's a very obvious thing to me because that is the image that gets conjured up. 'YOUTH ATTACKS OAP'. Whereas you are more like to get 'YOUNG PERSON SAVES LIFE' When you do headlines you try to make this person sound outstanding if someone does over an OAP you don't want to make them sound outstanding because it's not overly smart and it makes them seem respectable.

The very name of the council had an 'influential' role in challenging the idea that young people in Baston were stereotyped as 'trouble'. It is interesting to note here that the advisor to the council reinforces this idea of young people, rather than youth or for that matter children, in that he argues that children were simply 'young people' who had less social experience of the world than older people (adults).

Baston YPTC also saw 'influence' in terms of agenda setting. Here the councillors were much more sceptical of the kind of influence they could have. They were very conscious that 'youth' oriented projects rarely addressed issues in young people's terms.

Derek: They (the County Council) set up a project called 'Tomorrow's Voice' where they consult 7,000 young people by questionnaire which I think is all very good and yes if they listen to us that's even better. But my point of view is, you can send out questionnaires and get general information but what they need to do next, which was what they couldn't seem to grasp, was to get young people in a room to discuss issues and then go to the county council with these views rather than a questionnaire. We're getting asked what the adults want to ask us about, what do you think about x, y and z, when in fact it's fairly obvious what we're going to say about x, y and z, what do you think about public transport are they poor because we're probably going to think the same as a lot of people do . . . I got very annoyed.

Jane: Because we're students yeah.

Derek: Because we're students but other aspects a, b and c, we don't get asked about those yet those are the ones we want addressed.

There was a degree of ambiguity here. The councillors were sometimes put in a position where they had to go along with a pre-determined adult agenda, particularly where they participated in adult forums. Yet their own council operated to a greater extent from an agenda set by themselves. If nothing else, BYPTC allowed the councillors to discuss issues that were of interest to them.

Conclusion

Whilst I have only really touched on the ways in which the councillors think they can connect politically with their communities, the needs/interests tension pervades their accounts. One example of this is the naming of Baston council. The significance attributed to the name of the young people's council might suggest that the councillors are keen to establish themselves ontologically as young people or young citizens rather than what Qvortrup (1994) refers to as 'human becomings'. It is possible to divide up the period of childhood such that those nearer the adult/child boundary – those getting towards the end of their 'social apprenticeship' – qualify for the title of person/people. Yet, the data reveal that the councillors want to be recognised as young adults with life or social experience rather than age the main criterion for judging their worth. In referring to the idea of children's interests, we might speculate that this takes us closer to Lee's (1998) point that children and adults are more or less agentic depending on context and experience. This need for social status and recognition was one of three fairly modest aims articulated by the young councillors.

A second and associated aim was to challenge a needs conception of childhood based around the 'youth as problem' stereotype. The attempt to influence adult thinking on young people brought the English councillors in line with the political roles of the Indian case studies. Whilst cultural differences generate different ways of seeing young people, in both cases children saw themselves as counter stereotypes, who through good works and persuasion are attempting to alter the perceptions that adults have of young people. A third aim was to articulate the interests of young people based on either formal democratic principles or through more informal networks and friendships. From the councillors' perspectives there was an expectation that they were carrying forward the views of their peers. Whether the councils based on local government democratic principles are the best vehicles through which children's voice can be expressed and heard remains to be seen. The councillors expressed a mixture of optimism tempered by realism and scepticism. What was beyond doubt was the ability of the young research subjects to articulate the pros and cons of local democratic institutions in terms of their own structural positions as young people.

References

- Archard, D., *Children: Rights and Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1993).
Bernard van Leer Foundation, "India: Bal Sansad – Children's Parliaments", *Early Childhood Matters* 1999, February, 91, 37–41.

- Boyden, J. and Myers, W., *Exploring Alternative Approaches to Combating Child Labour: Case Studies from Developing Countries* (Florence: UNICEF, 1995).
- Casman, P., "Children's Participation: Children's City Councils", in E. Verhellen (ed.), *Understanding Children's Rights* (Ghent: Children Rights Centre, 1996).
- Cockburn, T., "Children and Citizenship in Britain: A Case for a Socially Interdependent Model", *Childhood* 1998 (5(1)), 99–117.
- Corsaro, W., *The Sociology of Childhood* (California: Pine Forge, 1997).
- Franklin, A. and Franklin, B., "Growing Pains: The Developing Children's Rights Movement in the UK", in J. Pilcher and S. Wagg (eds.), *Thatcher's Children?* (London: Falmer, 1996).
- Franklin, B. and Petley, J., "Killing the Age of Innocence: Newspaper Reporting of the Death of James Bulger" in J. Pilcher and S. Wagg (eds.), *Thatcher's Children?* (London: Falmer, 1996).
- Freeman, M., *The Rights and Wrongs of Children* (London: Frances Pinter, 1983).
- Hart, R., *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens* (London: Earth scan, 1997).
- Hutchby, I. and Moran-Ellis, J. (eds.), *Children and Social Competence* (London: Falmer Press, 1998).
- John, M., "Children's Rights in a Free Market Culture", in S. Stephens (ed.), *Children and the Politics of Culture* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- Lansdown, G., "Children's Welfare and Children's Rights", in P. Foley, J. Roche and S. Tucker (eds.), *Children in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).
- Lee, N., "Towards an Immature Sociology", *Sociological Review* 1998 (46), 458–482.
- Lee, N., "The Challenge of Childhood: the Distribution of Childhood's Ambiguity in Adult Institutions", *Childhood* 1999 (6(4)), 455–474.
- McClay, R., "Young New Zealanders take the Floor", *The Parliamentarian* 1995 (3), 181–183.
- Matthews, H. and Limb, M., "The Right to Say: The Development of Youth Councils/Forums within the UK", *Area* 1998 (30(1)), 66–78.
- Miller, B., "Youth Parliaments: A Parliamentary Approach to a Critical Population Problem", *The Parliamentarian* 1992 (4), 244–246.
- Ndebele, N., "Recovering Childhood: Children in South African Reconstruction", in S. Stephens (ed.), *Childhood and the Politics of Culture* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- Parry-Williams, J., "Child-sensitive Local Government Structures in Synergy with Children's Representative Bodies", in V. Johnson, E. Ivan-Smith, G. Gordon, P. Pridmore and P. Scott (eds.), *Stepping Forward: Children and Young People's Participation in the Development Process* (London: IT Publications, 1998).
- Parton, N., "The New Politics of Child Protection", in J. Pilcher and S. Wagg (eds.), *Thatcher's Children?* (London: Falmer, 1996).
- Prout, A. and James, A., "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems", in A. James and A. Prout (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (London: Falmer Press, 1997).

- Qvortrup, J., "Childhood Matters: An Introduction", in J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta and H. Wintersberger (eds.), *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994).
- Reddy, N., "The Right to Organise: The Children's Movement in India", *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 2000 (24(2)), 52–55.
- Roche, M., *Rethinking Citizenship* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).
- Ruxton, S., *A Child's Policy for 21st century Europe: First Steps* (Euronet <http://eurochild.gla.ac.uk> 1999).
- Ruxton, S., "Towards a 'Children's Policy' for the European Union?" in P. Foley, J. Roche and S. Tucker (eds.), *Children in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
- Stainton Rogers, W. and Stainton-Rogers, R., *Stories of Childhood* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).
- Stalford, H., "The Citizenship Status of Children in the European Union", *International Journal of Children's Rights* 2000 (8(2)), 101–131.
- Stephens, S., "Children and the Politics of Culture in 'Late Capitalism' ", in S. Stephens (ed.), *Childhood and the Politics of Culture* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- Woodhead, M., "Psychology and the Cultural Construction of Children's Needs", in A. James and A. Prout (eds.), *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* (London: Falmer, 1997).
- Wyness, M., *Contesting Childhood* (London: Falmer Press, 2000).