


Raising expectations for children – Charmaine Bonello

Children have the right to participate and share their views as citizens

Comment

Opinion

Society

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If we want adolescents in Malta to be responsible and active citizens, we need to start allowing them to do so from their earliest years. Waiting is a mistake.

Thirty years after Malta ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, the concept of ‘child participation’ is not yet fully realised in our islands, even though children’s rights and participation are fundamental concepts of democracy.

Privacy

Article 12 in the Convention explicitly says: “It is the right of every young child to be listened to and taken seriously.” In other words, children have the right to participate and share their views as citizens to influence decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives – within the family, the school or the community.

But how and when do we listen to our children in Malta? Do we give them space to influence decisions in matters that concern them? And do we listen to children of all ages?

Being a mother of two and having worked with and for children for the past 23 years, I can confirm that we still have a long way from realising a culture of child participation in Malta. Of course, I am also aware that despite sporadic efforts, it can still be a challenge to transfer what the UN Convention’s articles say into practice, particularly article 12.

Regrettably, children in our society are viewed as ‘becomings’ (potential citizens) rather than ‘beings’ (active citizens). Some might argue that not all children can express their views, especially when referring to very young ones. Therefore, we often silence them because we feel their contribution to dialogue and shared decision-making processes with adults would be futile.

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Others may contend that they find child participatory processes, particularly those involving young children, complicated and not worth the time and effort.

However, as several scholars point out, we need to raise our expectations for children to be involved and introduced to the process of decision-making to inform change from an early age.

As specified by the UN Committee, action across all levels – governmental, institutional and the local level – is to be taken to generate the right conditions for active citizenship from a young age, without having the weight of their opinions reduced. This is not a one-person mission, but a collective national responsibility to overcome the notion of children as innocent and powerless and enable shared decision-making between adults and children at all levels.

The UN Committee links article 12 to article 31 and refers to listening to children when planning for leisure and play facilities. In our society, children are missing out on the benefits of playing, exploring freely and getting closer to nature in safe outdoor spaces within their communities. This is limiting all children from opportunities of individual and community growth.

I hope that we are finally embarking on a mission to reverse this thanks to the commitment of the Malta Foundation for the Well-being of Society (MFWS) led by former president Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, in collaboration with four ministers – Infrastructure Minister Ian Borg, Environment Minister Aaron Farrugia, Local Government Minister José Herrera, and Education Minister Owen Bonnici.

It comes in the shape of 2,000 square metres of land in the heart of Żabbar, which the local council and government have dedicated to serve as a safe, open, inclusive, environment-friendly space for children and to resurrect a community spirit.

Project designers and early years' consultants have worked tirelessly to try and understand this space through the eyes of children aged 3 to 18.

This *Proġett Komunitarju Żabbar* has seen the MFWS use a child-centred approach – the team met over 500 children from Żabbar and other localities – to explore how children would design public spaces for themselves and their families.

This process helped children to act independently, be agents of their actions within a social context, express their views through various means and co-construct their childhood with adults.

The final design, co-created between children and experts, is currently being drafted for the works to start.

The child participation process used for *Proġett Komunitarju Żabbar* will now be replicated in six other localities around Malta; a national initiative that strives to nurture a culture of child participation from a very young age. It is grounded in a systematic commitment guided by a unified shared vision and skill-building among stakeholders and the children themselves.

A deeper understanding of children's participatory rights in local research, policy and practice would allow for higher levels of involvement and decision-making, nurturing a democratic ethos from a young age.

Now is the time – long overdue – to re-envision our perspectives of children as social actors to challenge and overcome long-standing barriers and for authorities to narrow the gap between child participation in policy and practice.

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