

**For Compass** 9/3/2016 <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/taking-social-inclusion-seriously/>

## **Taking social inclusion seriously?**

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The largest excluded minority is seldom mentioned in political debates. It consists of around one third of people in the world, one fifth in the UK, and almost one half of people in some [African states](#). This minority is children and young people aged under-18 years.

If children are mentioned in policy debates, the usual noun is 'childcare' with the aim to support working women by further excluding children into institutions for longer hours. Incidentally, the law regulates the minimum space per hen in chicken farms, but not per child in schools, or in early years centres where there may be no garden. In the university nursery beneath my office window, the children in the tiny paved yard cannot see or touch grass. Amid the clutter of educational equipment in cramped spaces, active children can easily seem 'hyper'.

Yet although they are so often overlooked, children are centrally affected by policies, such as the austerity cuts. Children are main users of health, education, youth and social services, of parks, sports centres and libraries, and of public transport since they cannot drive. The ['bedroom tax'](#) forces children and young people to share bedrooms, and can stop them from being able to stay with their non-resident parent. Although pensioners tend to have above average space and spare rooms, they are exempt from the tax. Growing concern over the severe impact of austerities particularly on young adults tends to miss the severe and inter-related effects on the under-18s.

In another broad policy area, delays over controlling the effects of pollution and climate change, children are also directly affected. The youngest bodies are most vulnerable to the dangers of floods, droughts, famine, disease, poisoned air and water, and enforced destitution and migration. Those who survive may endure decades of life-limiting disability.

In the politics of war and peace, armed conflict is now waged mainly in [urban areas](#) where very high numbers of children and young people live. Small bodies are at highest risk of being damaged, disabled or destroyed by warfare. A further problem is that today's light weapons help to increase recruitment of younger children as [active soldiers](#).

War increasingly devastates the body politic. Terrorists and even governments organise the bombing of infrastructure: water and electricity supplies, schools, housing and [hospitals](#), the essential supports for everyday life and survival. When the national median age is low (21 years in Syria and 15 in Gaza, whereas it is 41 in the UK) there are proportionately many more children in great need and many fewer adults to support them.

Adult support includes having the knowledge, skills and resources to restore and repair the built infrastructure, and there is also the crucial intergenerational transfer of the whole heritage and culture. Adults pass on explicit and tacit understanding of the trades and professions, science, arts and humanities, as well as the habits of neighbourly peace and civilised solidarity. In contrast, armed conflict and high mortality rates sow the seeds of war for decades to come, thriving on war's legacy of fear, mistrust, anger and despair, the desire for vengeance, and lost education and opportunities.

Another common disabling disservice to children, especially in post-industrial societies, is the myth that they are inevitably ignorant, helpless, unreliable and irrational. In reality, millions of young children around the world competently do vital paid and unpaid [work](#), most children help at home, and many of them care for their siblings or [for disabled relatives](#). When challenged, children show great reserves of courage and resourceful skill; for example, millions of children in South Africa live in [child-headed households](#).

The very protective and restrictive upbringing favoured in Britain today prevents most children from realising and demonstrating how reliable they can be. Children tend to be viewed as costs and burdens, whereas they could be far more highly respected and valued if they were more practically involved in everyday 'adult' concerns and politics.

The new policies that Compass is considering need adventurous, critically questioning and creative citizens. However, schools that concentrate on zero-tolerance discipline and compliant students' correct responses to ensure high scores in league tables discourage these very capacities.

Many children enjoy and succeed at school but many do not and, for them, one of the most serious effects is to split work from play. Babies are brilliant learners mixing intense curiosity, serious concentration, deep thought and much repeated effort with laughter, playful often zany exploring and creating, and absorbed pleasure. Too often, formal teaching and employment take the fun and joy out of learning and working, and instead enforce dull pointless unrewarding repetition and passive compliance.

There is then a danger of assuming that school work and employment are hard, complicated, often pointless, coerced and dull. Free time must therefore be easy, playful, entertaining, unchallenging and offering free consumer choices. Since the media and politicians attract public attention mainly during free time outside work time, it follows that many people want their politics to be light, amusing and entertaining, and to confirm rather than challenge or complicate their views.

In the Compass Report, [The Osborne Supremacy](#), Ken Spours considers we should

refuse to play by normal rules. This involves invoking a far more democratic idea of what it is to be a progressive organic intellectual...bringing active thinkers together in their thousands and millions. To paraphrase Gramsci, 'everyone is an intellectual even though they may not be a specialist intellectual by function'. Our task, therefore, is to help the 'thinker' in every one of us to become that little bit more specialised and connective.

Working and thinking towards the good society need to connect the rewards and challenges of playful work among all age-groups. This will involve great changes to adults' and children's daily lives, and my book [The Politics of Childhoods Real and Imagined](#) explores some of these potential changes.