

Are children's views being sought, listened to and taken seriously?

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Over the past few years, children (aged 10 and 11) completing the **Kids' Life and Times (KLT)**, an annual online survey carried out by ARK in primary schools, have been asked questions on their knowledge and understanding of their rights and awareness of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Results indicate that the majority of children are largely unaware of the CRC. For example, in 2010, only 25 per cent of children had heard of the CRC, increasing slightly to 28 per cent in 2012. In spite of a lack of awareness of the CRC *per se*, in 2012 the majority of children who completed the survey were able to identify that they had some specific rights: a right to a safe place to play (67%), a right to education (53%), and a right to have their views taken seriously (59%). Knowledge of the CRC and the rights contained in it does not mean necessarily that children are experiencing these rights in their everyday lives. However, questions asked in 2010 provide some insight into children's experience of their *participation rights* in school and at home. For example, over half of the children surveyed (58%) said that they had been asked by their teacher for an opinion about the way that something was run in their school, and 41 per cent said their parents or guardians usually asked for their opinion when making major decisions about things happening at home that might affect them.

Children's rights-based participation

While seeking children's views on matters that affect them is one component of the child's right to participate, what is more significant is the way in which these views are sought and the extent to which they are taken seriously and acted upon. As Article 12 of the CRC states, those acting on behalf of the state should *'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'*. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, who monitor how states are complying with the CRC, has explained that such rights-based

participation should be voluntary (that is, a right and not a duty of the child), respectful, inclusive, safe and in particular facilitated by child-friendly approaches to actively soliciting children's views (United Nations, 2009). The Committee also recognises that the child's right to be heard (Article 12, CRC) is closely aligned to his or her right to information (Article 17, CRC) which they describe as 'a prerequisite for the effective realization of the right to express views' (United Nations, 2009 para. 82). Further they state that the child's right to freedom of expression (Article 13, CRC) 'relates to the right to hold and express opinions, and to seek and receive information through any media' (United Nations, 2009 para.81).



CRAG from St Ita's Primary School, Belfast

Given the lack of data on how children experience their right to participate as articulated by Article 12 of the CRC and the inter-related articles noted above, the Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast (QUB), commissioned a module on the 2013 KLT to ascertain the extent to which children felt their views were sought, listened to and acted upon in school and community contexts. Funding for this was provided by 'Improving Children's Lives'— an initiative at Queen's, which seeks to promote evidence informed and children's rights-based approaches to services for children. The Centre for Children's Rights is committed to ensuring that its research is compliant with Article 12 and so the questions for the module were developed in collaboration with a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) who worked with Centre members throughout the research process (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012). The children in the CRAG were aged between 10 and 11 years and were pupils at St. Ita's Primary School, Belfast (see Photograph).

Developing the questions

In initial sessions with the children, time was spent familiarising them with children's rights in general and rights-based participation in particular. The children were then asked to imagine what a child might say about a school where the adults *really* respected the participation rights of children (see Figure 1). The children generated a number of statements which were then collated by the adult researcher. The process was repeated with children generating statements for a *community* that really respected children's rights.

The children in the CRAG were aware that the KLT module only allowed for a set number of questions, and negotiated with each other until the full set of statements was reduced to 14 items (8

Figure 1: CRAG example of a school that respected children's participation rights



relating to school; 6 to community) (see Table 1) along with one open-ended question. The adult researcher worked with the children to ensure that the items selected also reflected the core components of rights-based participation.

All P7 children in Northern Ireland were invited to take part in KLT and in 2013, 3773 children logged on to complete the survey. The fieldwork for the 2013 KLT survey was undertaken in May and June 2013.

Are schools and communities respecting children's participation rights?

Table 1 shows the overall results for the questions asked in relation to children's experience of their right to participate in school and in their community. The data indicate that children are fairly positive generally about their participation rights, in that the majority of children feel their views are sought actively by adults and taken seriously ('quite often', 'very often'

and 'always'). Further, they are more positive about their participation rights in school than in their community.

However, given that every child has a *right* to have his or her views sought, listened to and acted upon in relation to all matters that affect them, the proportion of children who report that this happens 'very often' and 'always' is salient.

Only a third of children (33%) said that they were listened to 'very often' or 'always' in relation to what they thought about school rules, while just over a third (38%) felt listened to when it came to what they did in class. Fewer than half the children (45%) reported feeling listened to 'very often' or 'always' in relation to how to make their school better. Moreover, just over half of the children (53%) felt that adults in school 'very often' or 'always' made it easy for them to give their views and just under half of the children (49%) felt that their views were 'very often' or 'always' taken seriously.

In response to the question 'In my community the adults ask me for my

Table 1: Children's views on their right to participate in school and in their community

	Never	Seldom	Quite often	Very often	Always
	%	%	%	%	%
My school listens to what I have to say about....					
What we do in class	12	17	34	18	20
What I have to say about school rules	16	21	30	16	17
How to make our school better	11	17	27	20	25
In my school.....					
I can give my opinions freely	9	16	26	19	30
The adults make it easy for me to give my views	6	14	27	24	29
The adults take my views seriously	8	15	28	24	25
The adults talk to me about how decisions are made	10	19	32	22	16
The adults make sure I can easily get the information					
I need about what is going on in the school	4	11	22	26	36
In my community.....					
The adults ask me for my views	23	26	27	15	9
The adults take my views seriously	17	23	29	17	13
I can easily find out about activities (like youth clubs, church clubs, sports activities) for children my age	5	8	19	27	42
I can easily find out about what's going on for children in places like libraries, museums, and parks	10	17	28	25	21
I am asked for my views on how happy I am with the activities in my community	23	23	25	17	12
The adults make it easy for me to give my views on the activities going on in my community	14	22	31	18	15

views', only around a quarter (24%) of the children agreed that this happened 'very often' or 'always', while nearly half (49%) said it happened 'seldom' or 'never'. Less than a quarter of the children (23%) felt their views were 'very often' or 'always' sought in relation to how happy they felt about activities in their community, and only around a third (34%) felt that adults in the community made it easy for them to give their views. Under a third of the children (31%) believed their views were 'very often' or 'always' taken seriously within the community.

Notably, only a minority of children (15%) felt that adults 'never' or 'seldom' made sure they had access to information about 'what is going on in school' and only a small minority (13%) felt they could not easily access information about activities for children their age in their community. However, over a quarter of the children (27%) did not feel they could easily access information about activities for children in libraries, museums, and parks.

Analysis of the KLT results by gender

indicates that girls are more positive about their participation rights in school than boys; and are also slightly more positive about their participation rights in the community than boys.

Responses to the participation questions were also analysed in relation to questions asked about 'happiness at school'. Children who said they were 'mostly happy' at their school were more positive about their participation rights than those who said they were 'mostly unhappy' or who could not decide.

What could be done to make sure that children's views are taken seriously?

The majority of the children (85%) who completed the KLT survey answered an open ended question in relation to children's rights: What do you think could be done (in your school or in your community) to make sure that children's views are taken seriously? The children

in the CRAG worked with the adult researcher to draw out key themes from these responses, described below.

Many of the responses suggested the need to 'ask children what they think more' and that adults needed to 'help children to say what they think' both in private and in public settings. Different mechanisms were offered for creating 'public spaces for conversations with children'. For example many of the children emphasised the need for school councils and for community councils where children's views could be represented. Children also suggested the need for 'private spaces for children to give their views', such as a specific adult they could speak to in their school or community or suggestion boxes where they could post ideas.

Children also suggested the need to raise awareness amongst their peers and with adults about the right to participate. For example they suggested 'advertising campaigns' and 'posters' about children's rights as well as 'teaching adults about children's rights' to 'make sure the adults do it [that is, listen to children]'.

Conclusion

While it is encouraging that many children feel they are being heard in school and, to a lesser extent, in community settings, it is evident that more needs to be done to ensure that that the right of every child to have his or her views sought, listened to and taken seriously is respected in all aspects of their lives. Further, it is clear that children want to be given a range of spaces in which they can express their views freely and in which they know they will be heard by the adults who carry the responsibility of listening to them. As the children themselves suggested, more needs to be done to raise awareness of children's participation rights, for adults and children alike.

Key points

- The majority of children who responded to KLT feel their views are, to some extent, sought actively by adults and taken seriously.
- Only a third of the children (33%) felt they were listened to 'very often' or 'always' in relation to what they thought about school rules; just over a third (38%) felt listened to when it came to what they did in class in school
- Children are more positive about their participation rights in school than in their community.
- Less than a quarter of the children (23%) felt their views were 'very often' or 'always' sought in relation to how happy they felt about activities in their community.
- Girls are more positive about their experience of their participation rights than boys.

References

Lundy, L. and McEvoy (Emerson), L. (2012) Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in)formed views. *Childhood*, 19(1), 1-16.

United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) *General Comment No.12 The Right of the Child to be Heard*. Geneva: United Nations

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Kids' Life and Times is carried out annually and documents children's opinions on a wide range of social issues. In 2013, 3773 children in Primary 7 took part in the survey online in schools.

The survey is a joint initiative of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what P7 pupils think about the issues that affect them. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/klt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 5962 with any queries.

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