Draft Report for Barnardo’s Northern Ireland
Involving Children in the Service Design Process

Laura Lundy, Lesley McEvoy and Bronagh Byrne

School of Education
Queen’s University Belfast

March 2010
Contents

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 3
2. The Sample ........................................................................................................... 4
3. Methodology ......................................................................................................... 5
4. Findings ............................................................................................................... 15
5. Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 37

References ................................................................................................................ 40

Appendix 1: Consent letter for parents ............................................................ 43
Appendix 2: Information Sheet for Children ................................................... 46
Appendix 3: Picture Survey ................................................................................. 50
1. Introduction

A research team from the School of Education at Queen’s University Belfast was commissioned to carry out this research by Barnardo’s Northern Ireland as part of the service design process for their ‘Ready to Learn’ Programme. The overall purpose of the research was to engage directly with Primary One children to inform the development of an out-of-school hours programme for children living in disadvantaged communities. More specifically, the research aimed to engage children in the service design of the programme in a rights compliant manner.

The research team is committed to working in a way that is consistent with international children’s rights standards. As such, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was used to guide the research in two ways. First, the research team drew upon the UNCRC and observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on issues such as research, education, play, and the design and evaluation of services. Second, by directly engaging children at key stages of the research process through a children’s rights compliant approach to participation. The research was organised in two main stages; establishment of Children’s Rights Advisory Groups (CRAGs), and qualitative interviews with children.

The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association were followed at all times. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Education at Queen’s University Belfast. Data collection was carried out during January 2010 and February 2010.

---

1. [http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guidelines/]
2. The Sample

Two schools were selected purposively to take part in the study. These schools were chosen for their location in recognised socially disadvantaged areas and the fact that they reflected the two main religious and community backgrounds in Northern Ireland.

Permission for each school to participate was initially obtained from school principals. The parents/guardians of one class of Primary One children in each school were contacted by letter and invited to participate in the study. Each child’s parents/guardians were provided with written information about the aims of the study, research methods, dissemination and uses of the research data, and ways in which anonymity and confidentiality would be respected. It was stressed that participation was voluntary, that there would be no adverse consequences of a decision not to take part and that participants could withdraw at any time. Parents/guardians were asked to give active consent for their child to take part by signing an individual consent letter. In addition, the research team explained the nature of the study and obtained consent from children themselves in an accessible and age-appropriate style. This was done through a pictorial and written information and consent sheet which parents were asked to read to their children. Children were asked to place a mark in the appropriate box, signified by red and green ‘traffic lights’ to demonstrate whether or not they were willing to take part in the research. The issues contained in the information sheet were explained again orally to the children at the beginning of the research and at each stage of the data collection process. At each stage of the process, children were given the option of withdrawing from any part or all of the activities.

In total, 27 Primary One children (ages 4-5) consented to take part in the study across both schools; 14 girls and 13 boys.

Research was only conducted with children who, along with their parents/guardians, had given their consent to proceed.

---

2 See Appendix A
3 See Appendix B
3. Methodology

The research team employed certain features of a children’s rights-based methodology developed and employed in other projects (Lundy and McEvoy, 2008, 2009; McEvoy and Lundy 2007). The methodology employed was informed by, and aligned with, participatory styles of research, and sought to comply with international standards on children’s rights.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires that all children, including young children, be respected as persons in their own right, with their own concerns, interests and points of view. Article 12 of the CRC gives children a right to express their views and to have those views given due weight in all matters affecting them. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors and advises on the enforcement of the Convention, has emphasised that this right should be:

“anchored in the child’s daily life at home …and in his or her community; within the full range of early childhood health, care and education facilities, as well as in… the development of policies and services, including through research and consultations.”

(UN, 2005, para. 14.)

The Committee has also recognised that certain groups of children, including younger boys and girls as well as children belonging to marginalised and disadvantaged groups face particular barriers in the realisation of this right. It is important to note that Article 12 is, however, not an obligation for the child, and the child also has the right not to participate should they so choose.

The Committee has stipulated that full implementation of Article 12 requires:

“recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences.”

(UN, 2009, para 16.)
3.1 Establishing the Children’s Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs)

In keeping with the rights-based focus of the project, and in order to ensure that the research process would comply with Article 12, the research team established two Children’s Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs) (Lundy and McEvoy 2009); one in each school. The primary task of each CRAG was to (i) advise on aspects of the research process including how best to engage with other children on the issues, and (ii) assist with the interpretation of the findings from interviews with other children. Members of the CRAGs were invited to participate in the project in their capacity as a key stakeholder group with particular expertise on the issues under consideration. The CRAGs also participated in aspects of the data collection process as research subjects. This would not usually be the case (see Lundy and McEvoy 2009), however exception was made here, in part because CRAG members were eager to participate in the range of activities, and in part because of the already small sample size.

The research team had initially intended that each CRAG would comprise of six Primary One children. However, given that this would have constituted a relatively large proportion of a small class size, it was decided that four would be a more appropriate CRAG size for this study.

Each CRAG comprised of four Primary One children (ages 4-5); two boys and two girls. The CRAG members were identified and selected by the class teacher. The research team ensured that all meetings of the CRAG were structured in ways that reflected the wishes of individuals and the group, that all children could engage actively and meaningfully with the issues, and that meetings were inclusive and held in a ‘safe’ and appropriate place where children were able to freely express their views (Lundy, 2007). The research team also emphasised to CRAG members that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time (Alderson, 2004; Hill 2005; Davis, 1998).

The research team met with each CRAG on two occasions during January and February 2010. Sessions took place in the school’s designated Primary One resource room or library and lasted on average about one hour with a break in the middle.
3.2 Assisting the CRAG in Developing and Expressing Their Views

Article 12 of the UNCRC requires that children are not only given opportunities to express their views but also be assisted in forming their views (Lundy, 2007). As such, initial meetings with the CRAG included capacity building activities, designed to familiarise the children with the issues surrounding the project (see Lundy and McEvoy 2009).

During the first meeting, each CRAG was asked to think about the questions outlined below. To facilitate discussion and encourage children to express their views, the research team used laminated images as prompts.

3.2.1 Why do children go to school?

The CRAGs were asked to think about why children go to school and why attending school was important. Images of children playing together and sharing, of children learning new skills, and of the different types of jobs people might do when they grow up were used to stimulate discussion and thinking among the children of the issues surrounding the project. The children commented that it was important to go to school so that they could learn new things such as reading, writing and numbers and that this would help them do other things.

3.2.2 What do you think helps children settle into P1?

The research team used images of key people in children's lives to discuss examples of the types of things that would help children settle into P1. These ‘key people’ included parents/family, teacher, classroom assistant, and friends. The research team asked the children to make suggestions of things that these people might do to help children settle. These suggestions were written down on coloured post-its and attached to the image. For example, children said that their family helped them settle in school by ‘helping you get dressed for school’ and when they ‘promise to come back’. Teachers ‘help with writing and drawing’ and by talking ‘in kind voices’. Classroom assistants help ‘with things you cannot do’ while friends ‘stand up for each other’ and ‘help you up if you fall’.
3.2.3 What do you think children like about P1/What do you think children find hard about P1?

In this activity, the CRAGs were asked to think about what children might like or find difficult about P1. To facilitate this, the research team developed a card-sorting exercise. Image cards of a range of activities and aspects of school life were produced and the CRAG were asked to decide whether each image should be placed in an ‘all children would like’ pile, an ‘all children would find hard’ pile, or a ‘some children might like and some children might find hard’ pile. Each ‘pile’ was represented by a hoop with the ‘some children might like and some children might find hard’ represented in the space between the hoops.

Figure 1 – Asking the CRAGs what they thought children would like or find hard about school

The following images were used for this activity

- Playing with friends
- Books
- Listening to stories
- Computer
- Playground (with climbing frames)
- School playground (no equipment/frames)
- Circle time
The children found it quite difficult to think beyond their own likes and dislikes. To try and get children thinking in a broader context, the research team asked the children to think about whether all the children in their class would like a particular activity or find it hard. This helped the children to identify that while they might have liked a particular activity, perhaps there was someone in their class who did not like that activity or who found it difficult.

### 3.2.4 How can we best find out the answers to these questions from other children?

The final activity of this session sought to find out from the CRAGs the best ways of finding out the answers to these questions from other children. The children felt that circle time would be a good way of finding out what other children thought. It was also clear that the children found the use of images to be helpful prompts. The research team asked the CRAGs if child-friendly cameras would be a good way of finding out what children liked and found hard about school. By way of demonstration, the research team showed the cameras to the children and gave them the opportunity to try it for themselves. Some of the children had previously used a similar camera and were able to use it with ease. The CRAGs were enthusiastic at this idea and felt that this would be a good way of helping their classmates tell us what they liked or found hard.
3.3 Qualitative Interviews with Children

The research team visited each school on two separate occasions to conduct qualitative interviews with Primary One children, employing a range of participatory research methods (see for example Christensen and James 2000; Alderson, 2000; Kellett at al, 2004; Lewis et al, 2004; O’Kane 2000).

Twenty-nine P1 children across both schools were invited to take part in this part of the study. In total, 27 children and their parent/guardians gave their consent to take part. The research team used methods that were both age appropriate and reflective of children’s evolving capacities, enabling young children the freedom to express their views and articulate their experiences in meaningful ways and on their own terms. The final methods utilised in the study were chosen in the light of advice from the Children’s Research Advisory Groups. The research team adopted a variation of the ‘mosaic approach’ to form a ‘living picture’ of children’s lives in the context of readiness to learn by using a combination of artwork, photography, and verbal forms of expression (Clark and Moss 2001). Specifically, through:

- Circle-time (Capacity-building exercise)
- Picture Survey
- Photographs
- Activity box exercise
- Artwork

The multi-method approach adopted in the study allowed the research team to ask the same question in different ways in order to (a) obtain a deeper understanding of children’s views on the pertinent issues, and (b) enable children to express their views in a range of ways, taking into account both the verbal and non-verbal ways in which young children express their views.

---

4 The ‘mosaic approach’ (Clark and Moss 2001) is a multi-method approach, specifically tailored at engaging younger children in research and whereby photographs taken by children can be combined with verbal forms of expression and observation to form an deeper understanding of children’s experiences.
3.3.1 Circle-time

As with the CRAGs, the research team carried out capacity building activities to familiarise the children with the broad issues around the project and encouraging them to develop their own views on these issues. This activity took the form of ‘circle time’; something all the children were already used to and were familiar with. This was divided into two parts. The research team first asked the children to think about what they liked about school, and then what they found hard about school. To encourage children to think about possible issues, images of school activities and the school environment were used as prompts. Selection of images for this activity was based on advice from the CRAGs around what they felt all children would like or find difficult, and those that the CRAG felt some children might like and some children might find hard.

The outcome of this activity varied between schools. In one school, the children appeared to be influenced by a ‘circle time effect’; that is, they tended to repeat the answer given by the previous person. In the second school, the research team asked the children to close their eyes and pick an answer before sharing it with the rest of the group. This meant that the children gave a greater range of responses independently of each other. It was evident that children were beginning to think about things that they might like or find hard about school, thus helping them clarify their own views of the issues.

3.3.2 Picture Survey

Following this initial capacity building activity, the research team carried out a picture survey. Eighteen children across both schools participated in this survey. The aim of this activity was to find out from children, independently of any ‘circle time’ effect, which aspects of school they liked and what they found hard. The research team developed a booklet of 12 images and the children were asked to place stickers on those images of things they liked, and to place an ‘X’ on the images of things they found hard. The images used for this activity were selected in light of discussion with the CRAGs, drawing on examples of things the CRAGs thought children might enjoy or find hard about school (see section 3.2.3 above).\(^5\)

\(^5\) See Appendix C for a copy of the Picture Survey.
3.3.3 Photographs

The use of cameras, whether disposable or digital, provides children with another tool through which they can express their views (Clark, 2004; Punch 2002; O’Kane, 2000). The research team provided all participating P1 children in each school with child-friendly digital cameras. Once the children felt comfortable in using the cameras, the research team asked them to record images of environments, events, places and spaces, depicting what they liked or found difficult about school. This was completed in two stages, with the first stage focusing on things the children liked, and the second stage focusing on things that children found difficult. Throughout this activity the researchers engaged with individual children to find out, not only what they were taking photographs of, but why a particular place, space or activity was being recorded and what it is was about this the children liked or did not like. Clark, for example, has highlighted how listening to children talking about their drawings, can reveal important insights into their understandings. (Clark 2005: 496). For example, one child in this study took a photograph of a ‘star chart’ in their classroom as something they found hard about school. When questioned by the researcher as to why they were taking this particular photograph, the child said this was because it was so hard to get the fifth and final star.
This activity lasted for approximately 20 minutes with 18 children participating. In total, 1200 photographs were taken, of which 191 were usable. As a large number of the photographs taken were not clear, it is not possible to quantify the final images by category other than to give a general impression of the types and range of images recorded. Of the usable photographs, 140 depicted things the children liked about school while 51 were taken of aspects of school life or activity that the children found hard. These photographs can be broadly categorised as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Likes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Found Hard</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School environment</td>
<td>Outside school environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting/drawing</td>
<td>Letters and sounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>Stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters and sounds</td>
<td>Bathroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>Coats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toys</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playtime</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School specific images</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.4 Activity Box Exercise

On the research team’s second visit to the school, the children were asked to participate in an ‘activity box’ exercise. During this exercise the children were asked to choose, from preselected picture sets, the things they found hard about school and would like help with in an after school club. The sets of images were taken from the photographs the children themselves had taken. The children could choose as many or as few images from a choice of nine sets, which they then placed into the ‘activity box’. During this process one member of the research team talked with the children to find out why they made their choices whilst another recorded the images that were taken for analytical purposes. 19 children took part in this exercise. Following this activity the chosen images were added by the children to the produced artwork as examples of things the children found hard and might want to do more of after school.

Figure 3: The Activity Box Exercise
3.3.5 Artwork

Given that some children in Primary One may not be able to write and that some may not be comfortable or able to express their views orally or through drawing (Coates, 2004; Punch, 2002), the research team employed the services of a professional artist to enable all children to express themselves in an inclusive way. The focus of this activity was on what an ‘ideal’ out of school hours programme would look like. The artist worked with the children in each school to produce a collage reflecting the children’s ideas about the ideal after school service, including who should be at such a service, what activities they would like to do, and what the environment would be like on the outside and inside. The children were able to draw pictures alongside the artist, if they wanted to, of their ideas. The research team made detailed observations during this session about what the children wanted represented on the collective artwork and why. In total, 27 children across both schools participated in this activity.

4. Findings

4.1 Discussing the Results with the CRAGs

The research team discussed with the CRAG the results of the picture survey and camera activities. The team demonstrated the findings of the picture survey to the children by using pictures of boys and girls to highlight how many children liked or disliked each activity or aspect of school life. When asked why, for example, some children might find stories hard, some members of the CRAG suggested this was because some children didn’t like sitting still for long when listening to stories. Other CRAG members suggested this might be because children find it hard to read by themselves.

The research team also discussed the findings of the camera activity with the CRAGs by providing examples of the images recorded by the children from each broad category. The discussion focused primarily on why children might find certain activities or experiences difficult in school. For example, children had identified ‘letters and sounds’ as a difficult activity. The CRAG suggested that this might be ‘because they think it’s boring or hard’. Images were also taken of ‘outside areas’. The CRAG suggested that this might be hard for other children because it was somewhere ‘they might fall and hurt themselves’ and that ‘people might push
you, like P6s, P7s and even P3s’. Some children indicated that they found the dinner hall ‘hard’. The CRAG suggested this might be because ‘maybe their dinner hall is really noisy and it hurts their ears’. Similarly some children had taken photographs of a ‘no running’ sign. The CRAG suggested that they might find this hard because they wanted to run or it might be because ‘It’s hard to remember the rules sometimes’.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 4: Demonstrating results of ‘the picture survey to the CRAG: The example used here is ‘schoolbag’*

The research team also discussed the findings of the photographs taken with the CRAGs by providing examples of the images recorded by the children from each broad category. Where it was not clear why a particular image had been recorded, the research team asked the CRAGs for clarification. For example, one child had taken a photograph of a rubbish bin as something they liked about school. However, the CRAGs were able to clarify that the focal point of the picture was the milk carton and fruit from snack time in the bin.
Another child had taken a picture of what, to the researchers, appeared to be green dots, but it emerged that this was in fact a picture of a caterpillar used in the classroom to assist children with syllables which the child in question enjoyed.
4.2 Discussion of findings

The range of methodologies used by the team provided the children with a range of ways in which they could express their views. It is clear from the findings that there is no ‘one size fits all’ answer or universal view, and that different children have different views of what they like and different experiences of what they find difficult in school and why. The importance of recognising the diversity of children in the process of service design has been recognised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child which has emphasised that “a comprehensive strategy for early childhood must also take account of individual children’s maturity and individuality.” (UN 2005, para 23)

The small sample size included in the study does not make statistical inferences possible. The results presented here cannot, therefore, be understood as representative of all children in Northern Ireland, of all Primary One children in Northern Ireland, or of all children in Northern Ireland who live in disadvantaged areas. Rather, this is what some children experience and these are their views.

4.2.1 What children like about school and find hard about school

The majority of children liked everything about school and enjoyed learning new things. This was demonstrated, in part, by the greater number and range of pictures that children took of the things they liked compared to the things they found hard. This can also be highlighted through the broad findings of the picture survey:
These results are discussed further below, in conjunction with the findings of the activity box exercise. The activity box exercise gave children the opportunity to further express their views, on an individual one to one basis, on the things they found hard and why this was the case.
The latter highlighted that while children may have previously indicated that they liked an activity, there may also aspects of a particular activity that they found hard.

4.2.1(1) Playtime

Both the picture survey and camera activities indicated that this was an activity children particularly liked about school. Of the 18 children who took part in the picture survey across both schools, 17 liked playtime (94% of the sample). However, during the activity box exercise almost half the sample (47%) said they found this hard.

![Figure 9: Children’s images of playtime – ‘Like’ category](image)

The reasons the children gave for this centred on difficulty in engaging with playground activities. Some children found using playground equipment such as climbing frames difficult as these were ‘very tall’ or found it hard ‘going over the wee bridge’. Other children found getting the hang of playground games such as hopscotch difficult. Of those who expressed difficulty with playtime during the activity box exercise, 67% were girls and 33% boys.

4.2.1(2) Artwork related activities

17 out of 18 children (94% of the sample) indicated they enjoyed artwork activities. This was borne out by the range of photographs taken by the children of artwork related activities.
During the activity box exercise, 53% of the sample said that they found artwork activities difficult. One child found it hard using paintbrushes because ‘they are tiny things’. Other children found using scissors tricky or simply found it hard to paint pictures.

4.2.1(3) Letters and sounds

During the picture survey, 17 children (94% of the sample) indicated they liked letters and sounds. This was also the largest category of images that were recorded of what children liked during the camera activity.

A number of children recorded images of letters and sounds as something they found difficult about school. One child said that this was because they found it difficult to ‘make the sounds’.
This was reiterated during the activity box activity where 58% of the sample said they found letters and sounds difficult. When asked whether it was letters or sounds they were referring to, the children said that it was the sounds in particular that they found hard.

4.2.1(4) Writing

The picture survey did not explicitly distinguish between letters, sounds and writing. Nor did the children record images relating to writing specifically. The research team felt that it would be useful however to include this as a category in the activity box exercise given that developing writing skills is an important part of the Foundation Stage in the Northern Ireland Curriculum.

53% of children who participated in the activity box exercise said they found writing difficult, with equal numbers of girls and boys attesting to this. Three children said that holding the pencil and making shapes of letters was particularly hard. Two other children commented that writing was hard because:

‘They do lots of writing’

‘You have to do what the teacher tells us’
4.2.1(5) Computer based activities

17 children (94% of the sample) indicated that they enjoyed computer based activities. Some children also recorded images of computers during the camera activity as something they enjoyed.

![Child's images of computers – ‘Like’ category](image)

31% of children who participated in the activity box exercise said that they found computer based activities difficult. One child said they found it difficult because they ‘don’t know how it goes’

4.2.1(6) Puzzle activities

17 children (94% of the sample) indicated that they enjoyed puzzle activities. Some children also took photographs of jigsaw puzzles they liked.
However, 58% of children who participated in the activity box activity indicated that puzzle related activities were difficult. The reasons for this related largely to the size of the puzzles and difficulty in finding matching pieces:

‘Too many pictures’

‘Hard because there is little bits’

‘Get the pieces mixed up’

‘Hard to make them match’

‘Sometimes I get it right and sometimes I don’t’

4.2.1(7) Numbers

16 children (89% of the sample) indicated through the picture survey that they liked numbers. Some children also took photographs of numbers as something they enjoyed during the camera activity.
21% of those who participated in the activity box exercise said they found numbers hard. Comments made by children on why they found numbers hard included:

‘Can’t print them out right’

‘Hard to make the number shapes’

**4.2.1(8) Stories**

While children did not express strong dislike for many school activities through the picture survey or photographs, greater variation was expressed in relation to stories and personal care issues within the school environment.

8 children (44% of the sample) who took part in the picture survey indicated that they liked stories whilst 9 children (50% of the sample) indicated they found stories difficult. Children also recorded images of storybooks during the camera activity to represent things they did enjoy and things they found difficult.
When asked by the researcher why they were taking a photograph of stories to represent something they found hard, one child said this was because they could not read or follow the story by themselves.

During the activity box exercise, 47% of children said they found stories difficult. When asked whether it was reading stories or listening to stories that was particularly difficult, the children said that it was reading stories by themselves that they found difficult.

4.2.1 Personal Care

Children consistently expressed greater difficulty throughout all activities of engaging independently with personal care issues such as putting on shoes or uniform, using a schoolbag, or using a communal bathroom. During the picture survey, 8 children (44% of the
sample) indicated that they found using the bathroom in a school environment difficult. This was reiterated during the camera activity where some children took photographs of the school bathroom, and a sink in the classroom. The research team sought clarification of this during discussion with the CRAGs. The CRAG suggested that some children might find this difficult due to fears that they would not get to the bathroom in time. They also suggested that it might be difficult for children to turn taps on and off.

![Image of bathroom](image1.png)

![Image of sink](image2.png)

*Figure 18: Children’s images of bathroom – ‘Hard’ category*

6 children (33% of the sample) indicated during the picture survey that they found it hard to put their shoes on by themselves while 5 children (28% of the sample) expressed difficulty in using a schoolbag. During the activity box exercise, one child commented that using a schoolbag was hard because there were so many things in it and that was it hard ‘getting break out and putting the box back in.’

6 children (33% of the sample) also indicated that they had difficulty with putting on uniform. This came through strongly during the activity box exercise with 42% of participating children telling us that this was an area they found hard and would like help with. Of those who expressed difficulty with uniform or putting on coats, 75% were boys and 25% were girls. The children told us that:

‘Putting on jumper is easy but zipper is hard’

‘Putting on jumper is hard’
‘Hard because there is zipper on coat and zipper on trousers’

‘Because you have to put it on by yourself’

Figure 19: Children’s images of coats – ‘Hard’ category

One child also commented that they found it hard to put their coat on every time they went outside to play.

4.2.1(10) Other Issues

A number of children recorded images of the external school environment as something they found hard about school. This had not been identified by the research team, highlighting the importance of enabling children to express their views in a range of ways. These images consisted largely of the metal fences surrounding the school and of the road in front of the school. One child took a photograph of the road outside the school. When questioned by the researcher, they said that this was the road they walked to school and they didn’t like this because it made them tired.
A child also took a photograph of what appeared to be glass blocks. Upon clarification with the CRAG, it transpired that this was a glass window in their classroom which they did not like because they couldn’t see through it.

4.2.2 *What would an out of school hours programme look like?*

The children had a range of ideas about what they would like to do in an out of school hours programme, of who would be involved and supervise this programme and the kind of environment in which an out of school hours programme would be located. The researchers framed the questions in the context of an 'after school club' which children understood. The
children in one school were able to draw upon existing experiences of attending an after school programme throughout this activity whilst most of the children in the other school did not have any prior experience of attending an after school club.

4.2.2(1) Types of activities

The types of activities children wanted to engage in as part of an after school club centred on toys and different forms of play. Children wanted to have cars and skates to play with, and ‘fun books’ to read. Other options proposed by the children included:

- Painting/Colouring in
- Lego
- Sand
- Dinosaurs and dinosaur books
- Playstation
- Slide/Swings

Figure 22: Artwork – the types of activities children wanted to do in an after school club
One child made reference to craft activities as something they had done recently in school and which they would like to do in an after school programme. Another child wanted ‘Suzy’ to play with. Following clarification it transpired that ‘Suzy’ was a large dog-shaped seat in the children’s current after school club which they could sit on when they wanted to read or relax. One of the children had also taken a picture of ‘Suzy’ during the camera activity as one of the things they liked about school.
Figure 24: Child’s image of ‘Suzy’ the after school club dog – ‘Like’ category

Figure 25: Artwork Activity – ‘Suzy’ the Dog
What type of person should supervise an ‘after school club’?

Without exception the children wanted someone who was ‘happy’. Some children wanted the person in an after school club to have ‘nice eyes’ and ‘a smile’. One child wanted a ‘granny’ to be in an afterschool club; perhaps reference to the warm and ‘safe’ characteristics often associated with a grandmother. Other children suggested that someone like their teacher or classroom assistant could look after children in an after school club. One child said that they would the person to be a ‘young boy’.

When asked what these people would do with them, the children wanted someone who:

- Who could help them;
- Who was good at different things like painting and drawing;
- Who was good at dancing.

Figure 26: Artwork activity – the type of person who should work in an after school club – Someone like a classroom assistant or a young boy
Figure 27: Artwork activity – the type of person who should work in an after school club – Someone like a ‘granny’ with a ‘nice smile and nice eyes’ and who is good at art and dancing and can cut hair.

4.2.2 What would an ‘after school club’ look like?

The children did not want the after school programme to look like a school. Rather, the views that children presented on the external and internal environment of such a service were strongly grounded in visions of something that was ‘soft’, ‘warm’, friendly, informal and relaxing.

When asked what the outside of such a setting would look like, some children initially suggested a school, but this was quickly replaced with the view that it should actually look like a house, with windows in the door you could see through.
Figure 28: Artwork – Images of what the children thought an ‘after school club’ should look like on the outside.

The children felt that the inside of such a service should be bright and colourful and that it should look like a playroom. Although this activity was carried out separately with each school, both groups of children wanted a ‘multi-coloured’ floor and brightly coloured walls (red and yellow, or pink, red and blue). One child said that they would like their own paintings on the walls and photographs on the walls of their friends and other children attending the club.

Figure 29: Artwork – Images of what the children thought an after school club should look like inside
The children also wanted the after school club to have soft chairs to sit on and ‘square tables’ that they could play at.

Children in one school placed emphasis on having a ‘snack table’ within their after school club from which they could go and choose snacks by themselves if they were hungry.

*Figure 30: Artwork - Image of ‘snack table’*
5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Overview

The purpose of this research project was to engage directly with Primary One children in order to inform the development of an out-of-school hours programme for children living in disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland.

The research team employed a children’s rights-based methodology to enable children across two schools to express their views on an out-of-school hours programme. This was achieved through (i) the establishment of, and engagement with, two Children’s Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs); and (ii) Qualitative interviews with children using a wide range of participatory methods.

It is important not to over-interpret or generalise the findings of the research given both the diversity of children’s experiences, and the relatively small number of children who participated in the study. Rather, it is more appropriate to focus on those broad themes emanating from the data, and which are grounded in the perspectives and experiences of those children who participated in the research.

5.2 What children like about school and find hard about school

Overall, it is clear from the research that most children like school and enjoy a wide range of Primary One activities from painting and computer based activities to learning numbers and circle time. It is also apparent however, that whilst, collectively this was the case, individual children experience difficulties with different things.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recognised that:

“Young children’s experiences of growth and development vary according to their individual nature, as well as their gender, living conditions, family organization, care arrangements and education systems.”

(UN, 2005, para (6f))
The two broad areas in which children attested to experiencing most difficulty related to (i) reading and writing; and (ii) personal care. Children found writing particularly hard and distinguished between difficulties associated with getting used to holding a pencil and in using a pencil to make shapes of letters or numbers. Children also said they found reading by themselves difficult because they could not follow or understand the words.

The second area in which children consistently expressed greater difficulty with in the study related to personal care issues such as using the bathroom, putting on a coat, shoes or uniform, or using a schoolbag independently of adult assistance.

5.3 What an out of school hours programme should look like

A number of broad themes emerged with respect to the who, the what and the how of an out of school hours programme. Children perceived the ideal service to be situated within a homely and colourful environment and where they could spend time with their friends participating in fun and engaging activities, or simply relaxing among soft furnishings. The need for careful consideration of a ‘suitable space’, environment and location of an out of school hours programme has been identified as a key element of such programmes in the academic literature more generally (Andrews, 2006; Barker et al., 2003; Mason et al., 2004).

The types of activities children told us they wanted to do within an out of school hours programme ranged from painting and crafts, to games, outdoor activities and a comfortable space for reading. They wanted these activities to be ‘fun’. Lauer et al. (2004) have highlighted that out of school hours programmes can vary greatly in their goals and their characteristics, and can encompass a wide range of activities; including not just those which relate closely to the school curriculum, such as support with reading and writing, but creative and engaging activities such as drama, arts and sports, and the pursuit of special interests.  

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has itself emphasised that:

“The value of creative play and exploratory learning is widely recognized in early childhood education. Yet realizing the right to rest, leisure and play is often hindered by a shortage of

---

6 See also Fletcher and Murison 2005; Kirkham and Evans 2000; Peter 2002 and Vandell et al, 2004.
opportunities for young children to meet, play and interact in child-centred, secure, supportive, stimulating and stress-free environments.”

(UN, 2005, para 34)

With respect to which adults should be present and involved in supervising an after school club, the children wanted this person to be someone who was ‘happy’ and friendly, with a fun personality and who could do a range of activities with them. That many children preferred the after school club supervisor to be someone like a ‘granny’ or their teacher or classroom assistant is perhaps indicative of the importance accorded to feelings of security and familiarity within any out of school hours programme. Indeed, the academic literature more generally suggests that issues of safety and supervision are of key importance for primary school aged children (Andrews 2001).

Ultimately, this research has shown that children’s experiences of learning vary but there is a commonality in what they consider to be a suitable and attractive out of school hours environment. Primary One children have a good understanding of what they find hard about school and, of the things they found hard, were able to select things they wanted to do more of after school. It is also clear that the Primary One children would like to attend an out of school hours service which is safe, fun, colourful and comfortable.
References


United Nations (2005), Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 7*


Appendix A – Parent Consent Letter and Consent Form

14 January 2010

Dear Parent/Guardian,

We are writing to tell you about a study we are conducting with Barnardo’s Northern Ireland called ‘Ready to Learn’. Barnardo’s Northern Ireland is in the process of developing an out of school hours programme for Primary 1 children which will be aimed at improving learning outcomes. The study aims to explore how children feel about school life, what they need to settle in and do well at school, and what an out of school hours programme to help them do this would look like.

We will be asking P1 pupils from two primary schools in Northern Ireland to take part in this research during January and February 2010. Six children from each school will be selected to become part of a Children’s Research Advisory Group. The role of this group will be to advise the research team on the best way to involve other P1 children in the study, and what questions we should ask P1 children. These children will be given child-friendly digital cameras and will be taking photographs in school to show us what they like and find helpful in school. If any of these photographs are used to report the findings, we will ensure that no child or member of staff will be identifiable from the images.

All the pupils in the class will be asked to participate in groupwork activities relating to things like their enjoyment of school, what they find difficult at school, and what they would like to do after school hours.

I am writing to ask your permission for your child to take part in the study. Three members of the research team from Queen’s University Belfast will be visiting your child’s school in the next couple of weeks to carry out the research. Your child’s involvement in the research will be entirely voluntary. On the day that the researcher visits your child’s school all children will be given the option not to take part if they do not wish to do so. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential.

We will use the information provided to us to write reports for Barnardo’s. The research team may also present the findings at conferences and publish materials in academic papers. The information provided will not be used in a way that any child, family or school could be identified. Neither the school name nor your child’s name will be used in the reports. We will only involve children in the research whose parents/guardian have signed and returned the enclosed consent form. If you agree to your child taking part in the study, please complete the slip below and return it to your child’s teacher within two days of receiving this letter.

I have enclosed an information sheet for your child about the research and would be grateful if you could read this to your child if you consent to them taking part. If you have any queries.

[Signature]

[Date]
regarding this study please do not hesitate to contact me on Tel: 028 90 975942 or by email on l.lundy@qub.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

Dr Laura Lundy
School of Education
Queen’s University Belfast
Ready to Learn: Involving Children in the Service Design Process

Consent Form

‘Ready to Learn’ is a Barnardo’s Northern Ireland project which is designed to improve educational outcomes for children. This study aims to find out what would help Primary 1 children settle in at school and what an out of school hours programme for P1 children would look like.

Your child’s class has been selected to take part in this study through groupwork activities and discussions with researchers. Participation in the research is entirely voluntary and your child’s involvement will only be allowed with your agreement, and the agreement of your child.

The information provided by your child will be used by us to write reports for Barnardo’s. We may also use the information to present the findings at conferences or for publication in academic journals. Artwork and photographs from the project may be used for display purposes and in publications to report the findings. We will ensure that no child or member of staff will be identifiable from the images. We will ensure that your child’s anonymity is guaranteed and that the information will not be used in a way that a child or family could be identified.

I give my consent to allow my child to take part in this study

I do not give my consent to allow my child to take part in this study

Please sign below.
Child’s name: ________________________________
Signature of parent /guardian: ________________________________
Date: ________________________________

Please return this form to your child’s teacher within two days of receiving this letter. Thank you.
Hello! Our names are Laura, Lesley and Bronagh.

We work at a place called Queen’s University. A university is a place where some people go to learn when they grow up.

Queen’s University Belfast
We would like to come and visit you at your school because we think that you can help us.

We want to find out about the things that help you settle at school and what you like to do after school. This is so we can find out what will help you to learn better at school.
When we come to visit you, we write things down so that when we go home we will be able to remember what you told us.

If you want to stop talking to us at any time, that is okay.
Consent form for Children

My Name is________________________________________

Please put an ‘X’ in the box

Yes  I would like to help Laura, Lesley and Bronagh

No   I do not want to help Laura, Lesley and Bronagh
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boy/Girl</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Crayons" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Reading" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3" alt="ABC" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Backpack" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Drawing" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Computer" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>