NICCY

northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

in association with

Queen's University Belfast

A boy not getting a say in a conversation.

School's Report:

AN ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH CONDUCTED WITH SCHOOL CHILDREN

INTO CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

CONTENTS:

THE SCHOOLS RESEARCH

This report provides a detailed analysis of the submissions made by children and young people who contributed to a research project, which examined the state of children's rights and welfare in Northern Ireland. In light of the huge contribution made by children and young people to this research, we would recommend that this book is read in conjunction with the main research report entitled 'Children's Rights and Welfare in Northern Ireland'. The aim of this research funded by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, was to identify the gaps, problems and difficulties in the protection, promotion and implementation of children's rights in Northern Ireland. In identifying areas where children's rights are underplayed or ignored, this research aims to assist the Commissioner's understanding of the state of children's rights in Northern Ireland as well as inform debate around consultation on the Commissioner's priorities.

The analysis, which follows focuses on the submissions received from 1067 school children from 27 schools drawn from the five Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland. These children were aged between 5 and 16 (and up to 19 years of age in special schools) and were educated in mainstream schools, special schools and Irish medium schools. Children and young people were asked to think about issues they felt were unfair in the home, in the area/community where they lived, in the school, in the play/leisure facilities in their local vicinity. They were also asked about those images that came to mind when they heard the words 'crime' and 'police' and about general decisions affecting their lives in which they would like to have a greater say. To accommodate the age range of the sample, children and young people were invited to contribute to the research by a variety of methods including drawing pictures, writing stories, designing posters or undertaking tasks which were appropriate to their level of understanding. A breakdown of the schools sample in terms of techniques of data collection, gender, age, school type, religion and location is provided in Table 1, Appendix 1a.

METHODOLOGY

The following section provides a detailed account of the methods used to obtain the views of the children and young people who participated in the research. It deals with issues around access and obtaining informed consent, piloting the research, using child-friendly methods and how the data were analysed and written up.

CONFIDENTIALITY, ANONYMITY AND INFORMED CONSENT

In accordance with usual school and research practice, consent to take part in the research was sought and gained from parents/guardians (see Appendix 1b). Irrespective of parental consent, all children were advised that they were under no obligation to take part in the research and that they were free to change their mind regarding participation at any point during the process of data collection. Children were informed that what they told us through pictures, posters, stories and discussion groups etc. would inform the Commissioner's priorities about the areas and issues of children's lives that he should work on. They were told that some quotes from their stories, some drawings and posters would be used in the final report to the Commissioner and that the Commissioner might also choose to display some of this information in his offices. It was made very clear that all names and other possible identifying features would be removed from any of the material we would use. To emphasise this point we asked children to choose a pseudonym for themselves (gender appropriate) and to write this and their age on the back of their picture, poster or story [1].

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1   Not all children complied with this and either wrote their real name or no name at all. This was particularly true of the poster task when the group was made up of both boys and girls, this has resulted in the use of a code called 'mixed gender group'. For this reason, percentages referring to 'boys' responses and 'girls' responses will not add up to 100.

Time was taken at the beginning of each exercise to explain in appropriate language, and through the use of examples, that any information given would be dealt with in a confidential manner. Additionally, the circumstances under which we may have to share some information with someone else were clearly explained (i.e. child protection issues and concerns about safety of children). For older children, an information leaflet in the form of a comic strip produced by Barnardo's explaining anonymity and confidentiality was given to all children to read before any task began.

Throughout the explanation of the research aims, consent, confidentiality and anonymity procedures, we constantly checked with children that they understood this and asked if there were any questions. This was repeated after explaining the task we wanted them to complete and again children were free to ask questions at this point and any point throughout the process of data collection. This ensured that consent was 'informed and ongoing'.

In keeping with a children's rights approach, all children who took part in the research were given a flyer [2], which outlined their key rights under the CRC and contained the web address of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. A number of teachers also expressed an interest in the research and agreed that they would explore the issue of children's rights further in class time and assist the children in accessing the website.

PILOT EXERCISE WITH SCHOOL CHILDREN

The aim was to make the process of contributing to the research interesting, engaging and fun for all children involved. In order that this was achieved and that all children understood what was being asked of them, methods were piloted in two schools located in a working class and middle class area. Two hundred and forty three children aged between five and 11 years participated in the pilot study.

This exercise revealed that children were able to express their views through our chosen methods but that a fair amount of class discussion was necessary before beginning the task. This discussion was centred around the themes of the research, which included things children considered unfair about school, about living in a family, about their area/community and about the play and leisure facilities in their neighbourhood. Children were also asked about decisions they would like to have a greater say in and about the words and images that came to mind when they heard the words 'crime' and 'police'. The ideas generated from this discussion were written on the blackboard/whiteboard as examples of the types of issues that children could raise in their submissions to the research. This exercise proved extremely useful in providing children with a clear idea of examples as to the kind of issues that they might raise. Having said this, it became apparent that these points should be wiped before the task began as there was the risk that children would simply copy what was in front of them, rather than choosing what issue/s were most important to them.

This process also revealed that the best method was to let children choose the way in which they wanted to convey their views. While we were aware that not all children would be comfortable writing stories and may prefer to draw pictures, we found that the opposite was also true, that some children preferred to write than to draw. The exercise also ironed out small issues regarding the use of child friendly language and examples, and as a result the final methods were refined in accordance with the lessons learned from this exercise. A number of techniques were used to collect the data and are summarised below.

2   This flyer was downloaded from the NICCY website.

INDIVIDUAL DRAWINGS

Individual drawings were used primarily with younger children (i.e. those aged between five and seven years who were in Key Stage 1), although children from other age groups opted for this method. In total, 154 children expressed their views through pictures. After a class discussion on what children considered to be unfair in regards to the research themes (i.e. schools, home life, their community, play/leisure or views of crime and policing), pupils were asked to draw a picture highlighting the one issue they would like the Commissioner to address. To assist with the interpretation of children's drawing, all pupils were asked to write in their own words what their drawing depicted. Where children had difficulty doing this, one of the researchers would ask them to describe their picture and their comments would be written verbatim.

STORIES

Stories were used across all age groups but were offered primarily as a method to those at Key Stage 2 (i.e. children aged between 8 and 11 years) and above. Pupils were advised that spelling and grammar were not an issue and they were encouraged to write their own views in their own words. It was made very clear that this was not a test and that there was no right or wrong answer. This technique was particularly useful in that it allowed children the option to write about personal issues that they perhaps could not express in pictures or feel comfortable doing in a group poster. Children were free to write about as many issues as they wanted and a total of 388 stories were collected. All extracts taken from stories and presented in the report are presented in the children's own, words and language (verbatim).

GROUP POSTERS

Posters were the chosen method of the majority of the children, particularly older children in primary schools and children in post-primary schools and were more likely to be drawn by children in Key Stage 3 (i.e. those aged between 12 and 14 years) and Key Stage 4 (i.e. those aged between 15 and 16 years). The poster task was a little different to the other techniques of data collection in that it was undertaken in groups (of at least 4 students) and the poster was to be on a particular topic (i.e. either school, home, crime/policing, community, play/leisure). It was suggested that the young people discuss what was to go into their poster as a group in order that the views of everyone were represented. It was also requested that any pictures drawn be supported with written text. Tasks were written on colour-coded cards and a representative from each group randomly chose a colour. In this respect, then, children were not wholly free to discuss whatever they wanted but were limited to a certain category. This technique was adopted in order that we would be sure to gather information across all of the project themes. Similar task cards, using age appropriate forms of wording were used for primary and post-primary school children while gaining information on the same issues (as displayed in Appendix 1c).

Although teachers were often present during data collection, as this was the policy of many schools, in the main they left the researchers to undertake data collection freely. On occasions, however, children preferred to ask their teachers' questions, spellings or to write on their picture for them. With regards to children in Irish Medium schools, all of the techniques were translated into Irish and data collection was undertaken by a fluent Irish speaker. All material was translated back into English for the purpose of analysis but is presented in both English and Irish in the report. The same data collection technique was used with Portuguese children and their views are presented in both Portuguese and English in the report.

CHILDREN WITH MODERATE LEARNING DISABILITIES (MLD)

Teachers in special schools provided an invaluable source of guidance in terms of designing methods, which allowed children to express their views freely. Much time was taken before the commencement of data collection to discuss methods and the wording of tasks with teachers and it was suggested by one school that we meet, interact and engage with the children before data collection commenced. This helped introduce us to the children, establish some level of rapport and prepared them for our later visits to work with them on the research.

It was decided that children aged between 7 and 13 years would draw pictures and children between the ages 14 and 16 would design posters. On the advice of teachers, and in light of research evidence suggesting that children with MLD often have difficulties 'retaining and applying previous learning' (Costley, 2000: 164), it was also decided that anything written on the board during the discussion stage would be left there in order to help with spelling and to remind the group of the sorts of issues they might want to include.

The wording, font and layout of the poster tasks were amended while still gathering the same information. To encourage children to write on posters and pictures themselves and in their own words, blank squares of paper were given out and if a child wanted a word/phrase spelt a teacher or researcher would write it for them and they would then copy this on to their picture/poster.

CHILDREN WITH SEVERE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES (SLD)

As some children with severe learning difficulties generally have limited communication and cognitive skills, methods, which both engaged these children and allowed them to express their views, were adopted. As Butler et al. (2003: 25) state, 'the child's right [to be heard] is not dependent on his or her ability to *express* views, but to *form* them' (original emphasis), and it is the researchers' duty to develop methods which enable all children to express their views.

The research team visited the school in advance of the exercise to design a computer-based data collection tool. This meant that there was ample opportunity to meet most of the children who would be involved in the task on a number of occasions. Again, this aided in establishing rapport and a level of trust and understanding among these children, but it also allowed us to gauge, to some extent, the child's 'communication capabilities' (Detheridge, 2000), which was imperative to the designing of appropriate techniques of data collection.

Again the support and advice of teachers was invaluable in helping devise such methods. For the children aged between 8 and 14 years a game was devised. First, a series of pictures representing key issues under each of the themes was created using a specially designed computer package within the schools, which all of these children were familiar with. The key issues were based on a preliminary analysis of the schools data. The children then sorted the pictures into what they thought was fair and unfair and those that they thought were unfair were posted into Dusty Bin. A free option was also included so as they could add anything else they wished. The task took place in small groups with a teacher and at least two researchers present, as children often needed one-to-one guidance. Prior to commencing the actual sorting of the pictures, the researchers talked the children through what they understood by the words 'fair' and 'unfair' and ensured that they understood the task in hand (details of the method may be found in Appendix 1c).

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The teachers advised that the older children with severe learning difficulties were keen to talk to express their views and so we carried out a number of discussion groups with those aged between 17 and 19. Again, previous research suggests that groups discussions and interviews are an appropriate method to collect information from those with learning difficulties as they often find it easy to relax in the company of those they know and 'have the support of friends who would encourage each other to take part and to discuss issues' (Costley, 2000: 166). We found this to be true of our own experiences in that some young people would help others articulate their views and encourage them to open up. All of the young people involved in the discussion groups were capable of expressing their views verbally but rather than holding a focus group we decided to use a more interactive approach using flip charts and coloured pens to write their views as they told them to us. For practical and ethical reasons, it was decided not to ask for the consent to tape-record these discussions. We had not met these young people prior to the day of data collection and felt that as strangers to arrive armed with tape-recorders may be off putting and intrusive.

ANALYSING AND PRESENTING THE DATA

Although all data were collected using a variety of qualitative techniques, there was a level of structure to this that enabled analysis through our main research themes (i.e. implementation; family life and alternative care; education; health, welfare and material deprivation; play, leisure and the arts and youth justice and policing). Content analysis allowed these key issues and others, which arose through the data to be identified. These key issues were coded thematically to ensure that all of the issues raised (whether in the form of a story, picture, poster, discussion group, Dusty Bin task, interview or focus group) were categorised into one of the main project themes.

With regards to the schools data, this allowed for the frequency of the key issues to be explored by theme. It should be noted here that there was a considerable degree of overlap in the issues raised under particular themes. For example, some children and young people expressed concerns about their safety in the general area in which they lived because here they were exposed to joyriders and drug takers and they expressed concerns about their safety in the area in which they played because of the presence of older youth engaging in anti-social behaviour or because the play equipment was vandalised and/or broken. In the initial coding process each of the above concerns were coded under the themes of area and play. However, during the analysis process both concerns about safety were amalgamated on the basis that the same point was being made. It should also be noted that pupils in particular schools perceived some issues as more important than others. Unsurprisingly, the issue of broken promises emerged as one of the top issues, which pupils rated as most unfair about school. In anther school, security procedures which prevented pupils from leaving the school grounds at lunch time were criticised by the pupils as a breach of their right to freedom of movement, even though this measure was for their own safety and protection.

Due to the nature and variety of techniques of data collection employed in schools it is not possible to highlight the priority issues for children and young people across all themes (e.g. to say that more children found unfairness in the family than they did in school), but instead we can identify the priority issues within themes (e.g. that the issue of most concern regarding school was having no say in decisions). This is the case because some methods of data collection allowed children to raises issues across all themes (e.g. pictures, stories and discussion groups), while others limited or directed children to highlight key issues within a particular theme (e.g. they may

have been asked to design a poster only on things they thought unfair about school). It should also be noted that figures and percentages relating to the schools data within the report are relative rather than absolute. That is, they refer to the total number of responses relating to a certain issue, rather than total number of children raising that issue. Again this is because some children were free to raise multiple issues. This, however, does not detract from the overall aim of highlighting the issues of primary importance to children within each theme area, and as previously demonstrated, a broad range of methods, which allowed multiple or single responses were necessary for working with such a wide variety of children and young people.

CHAPTER:

one

FAMILY/HOME

WHAT'S UNFAIR ABOUT LIVING IN A FAMILY?

When asked about things they considered unfair in the home, children and young people raised seven main issues. When placing these in the order that they were most frequently mentioned, these were: 'issues with siblings'; 'having no say in family matters'; 'issues with parents; 'no privacy in the home'; 'my family is fine'; 'other' issues and 'concerns about divorce and separation'. Figure 1.1 illustrates the percentage of the 489 submissions relating to the family/home, which were categorised under each of those headings.

Figure 1.1 Family/ Home: Main Issues
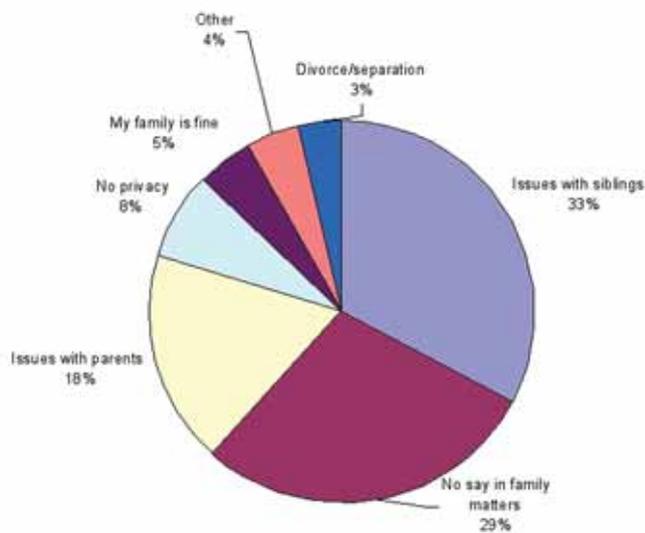
ISSUE 1: MY FAMILY IS FINE

It is important to note that out of the five project themes which children and young people could have chosen to write, draw or talk about in their submissions to the research, the least popular topic, or the one which most children and young people chose not to discuss, was that of home and family life. Only 489 submissions were made in relation to the home compared to 903 for school, 620 for play/leisure, 506 for area and 604 for police. This may have been for a variety of reasons such as children and young people wanting to keep the home and family sphere private, or alternatively it many have been that they did not perceive their home life as having as many unfair aspects associated with it as the other themes. Indeed 23 out of 489 (5%) of comments made referred to the fact that their family was 'fine'. Furthermore, though many children and young people listed issues they considered unfair about living in a family, several chose to end their submission with comments such as 'Nothing is unfair in my family' as if reflecting that small issues which had once annoyed them were insignificant when placed in the broader context of how lucky they were to live in a loving and supportive family.

Typical comments included:

'I consider myself lucky to come from a family that loves me and cares for me. I feel that I can tell them anything and I trust them' (Girl aged 15).

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'I live in a family of five children and two parents. I wouldn't say we are rich but I wouldn't say we are poor. My parents have worked very hard in their lives to give us good lives. My mother was an orphan at the age of 9 and when she was 15 she met my daddy. They had their first child at the age of 18 and then 20 and then 22. But they have worked so hard since then and have come a long way to have 5 beautiful daughters and a marriage full of love with a newly built house to match. I wouldn't give up my family for anything in the world' (Girl aged 14).

Ni bhionn tabhb ar bith agam le mo theoghlach ta mo thuisitheoir scairthe ach ta said cairduil lena cheile agus faigheann said at aghaidh. I don't have any problems with my family. My parents are separated but they are friendly towards each other and they get on. (Girl aged 14).

ISSUE 2: ISSUES WITH SIBLINGS

The issue children and young people considered most unfair about living in a family related to living amicably with their older and younger siblings. One third of all submissions (33%, or 160 out of 489 submissions) raised the issue of sibling rivalry. Just under two thirds (59%) of all the pupils who raised this issue were aged 5-11 years suggesting that family tensions with brothers and sisters are most likely to occur when children are young. These particular pupils complained that they were treated differently to older/younger brothers/sisters, and/or that their siblings annoyed/picked on them by bullying or by refusing to share toys. Older children were especially likely to comment that their parents favoured younger brothers/sisters because parents expected older children to take responsibility for their actions and to 'know better'. As these children explained:

'If you are playing a game on the play station and your sister asks your parents if she could have a go, they are normally allowed, but when you ask if you can have a go you are not normally allowed. Your sister and brother normally get more because they are younger. When something happens that your sister has done, you normally get blamed and they normally get more attention' (Girl aged 11).

'… Family matters are also irritating because if you have a younger brother or sister and you get into a fight, then your parents always side with the younger child - even if it wasn't you who started the fight. I think they should listen to both people and agree with the argument that sounds the most reasonable' (Boy aged 11).

'I think it is not fair when I am watching TV in my room and my sisters just barge in and watch whatever they want' (Boy aged 8).

'Most of the time your family treat you unfairly. Since I'm the oldest it's always do this, do that. I'd be trying to get ready to go out and they're telling you to do something. It's the same with homework. It's a battle to make it down the hall to the toilet without them on your back. You have to show your brother how to act responsibly. I couldn't be bothered. No one showed me what to do when I was young so he can do just grand. There are times when you could kill the wee shit, he talks and talks and talks. In the car I'd be ready to snap. I'd be ready to strangle him. Why can't he just leave me alone? He thinks because he's the youngest he can get away with it and he does. Mum and dad show total favouritism' (Girl aged 14).

What these comments suggest is that other factors (such as favouritism and parental expectations) may play a role in fuelling disagreements among siblings. Whether the disagreement erupted over issues such as who should possess the television remote control, who should get to choose what to eat at diner, or who should be involved in housework, the underlying issue tended to be predominantly about power and control and getting your own way.

'My brother annoys me when he takes over our room. He has a DJ set and he plays it when I am in the room on the computer. He just plays it to annoy me' (Boy aged 13)

'My brother sometimes gets treats and I don't. He fakes that I hit him and I get in trouble' (Boy aged 9).

'I hate the way my sister annoys me but that's just normal. She'd get more money than me and gets to go out more. If I broke my mum's trust I wouldn't be allowed to go out but if it's my sister - she would just talk mummy into it' (Boy aged 11).

ISSUE 3: NO SAY IN FAMILY MATTERS

Of the 489 submissions relating to family/home, 141 responses (29%) expressed dissatisfaction about having no say in family matters. Children and young people raised a number of issues they felt they were not consulted on. For example, they expressed annoyance at their lack of say in personal decisions such as deciding what time to go to bed, how to spend their pocket money, how to spend their free time, what time to come in at and what programmes to watch on television. Concerns were also raised about not having a say as to how much pocket money they received compared to their siblings and no say in negotiating increments in their pocket money, as they grew older. Additionally, those who were obliged to complete household chores complained that this, and the type of household chores they were expected to do, was non-negotiable. The last concern that children and young people raised under this issue was having no say in decisions, which affected their entire family. These decisions included moving house, choosing a family holiday, picking a family car or making an important financial decision.
The data suggested that pupils aged 9-11 and those aged 15-16 were amongst the most likely groups of pupils to express concerns about their general lack of say in family life. Boys were also slightly more likely than girls to express dissatisfaction with their lack of say in family matters with 47% of boys compared to 39% of girls suggesting that this was undemocratic. Typical comments relating to these issues included:

'I've got no problem with my family it's just that I don't get to stay out to the time that I want to. We should be allowed to do the same things other families do' (Boy aged 15).

'The thing that annoys me about my family is that my brother gets £5 a week and I get zelch. Also my brother gets to do everything but I am too young' (Girl aged 11).

'I get annoyed about my bedtime because all of my friends get to go to bed later than me when they are the same age as me. Also, in the summer months I have to go to bed in daylight' (Boy aged 11).

''Kids are not asked if they want to move house they are just told. Children have no say in where they move. Children have no say in how the house is wallpapered and in which colour'
(Boy aged 15).

'I don't think it's fair the way the men in the house expect the girls to go out in the farm and they don't even help in the house' (Girl aged 11).

ISSUE 4: ISSUES WITH PARENTS

The fourth most popular concern raised in 89 submissions (18%) related to having 'issues with parents'. Several concerns were raised in this category, the main one being the perception that parents were too over protective towards their children. As pupils grew older they were more likely to describe their parents as over protective with 31% of children aged 9-11, 20% of children aged 12-14 and 24% of young people aged 15-16 describing this as 'unfair'. Girls aged 13-15 and who lived in rural areas where amongst the most likely pupils to complain that their parents were over protective. Amongst this particular group, girls who were the youngest members of their families were particularly likely to complain that they were 'treated like a child' on account of parental restrictions placed on their movements and their dress code. Being 'treated like a child' and regularly quizzed by their parents about where they socialised at the weekend and with whom was a common complaint among this group and appeared to lead to many of these young women feeling that they were not trusted   This not uncommon and well documented tension between parents and their teenage daughters is reflected in the following comments.

'I hate when you tell your parents you are going somewhere with your friends and they ask you about 101 questions. When, why, what…etc. (Girl aged 14).

'They don't trust me or leave me alone to do what I want. I have my own responsibilities - friends, life and school but they treat me like a baby and I don't understand' (Girl aged 14).

'I think my family should trust me more and that you should be allowed out more than once a week even on a school night with your friends or with your boyfriend. When you come home from being out they ask you where you have been, what you were doing. I think you can keep them things to yourself and you shouldn't have to tell' (Girl aged 13).

'I'm annoyed with my family because I'm the youngest and I get treated like I am a child. I have to come in earlier than the rest of my friends. Also, they think I don't understand lots of things when I do' (Girl aged 15).

'The only think wrong with my family is that my parents won't let me grow up. He like to call me "His wee girl" and when I say I'm not a child, I'm an adolescent, he's always saying that I'll be a child until I'm 50! ' (Girl aged 14).

Also included in the category of 'issues with parents' were concerns about parents spending too little time with the children on account of work commitments and parents not listening to/ignoring children. Although these issues were raised by only a small number of children, this should not detract from the perception children have of what is important in family life - namely living with family members in a safe and warm home, and being a valued and respected member of a loving family. Children who raised issues relating to parents working too much or shouting at children remarked:

'My dad doesn't have dinner with us because he works from early in the morning to late at night. ……… I would like to have a proper dinner with my family' (Girl aged 9).

'My family never get out together because my parents are always in work' (Boy aged 13).

'I think parents shout too much and I think they give us too much pressure. I know they try to do their best and sometimes they look after us too much and don't give us too much freedom. They're always worrying. I think children should do what they want but learn from their mistakes in the future' (Boy aged 14).

'It's unfair that I always get annoyed by my dad, by him usually not paying enough attention to me' (Boy aged 10).

'Sometimes parents don't try to see things from your point of view. They believe because they are older and more mature then they are right which could lead to disagreements instead of compromising' (Girl aged 13).

In addition to not listening to their child's viewpoint, a small number of children complained that their parents had unrealistic expectations of them. In most cases these expectations centred on success in school. The suggestion that nothing was ever good enough for their parents and the desire to be accepted just as they were underpinned many of these comments:

'I think families should trust their children after a mistake they have did and I think families should love you for the way you are not for the way they want you to be' (Girl aged 13)

'Sometimes I feel that because I am the youngest, so much is expected of me. For example, I have to be as smart as my brothers are or as good at drama as my sister is' (Boy aged 11).

ISSUE 5: PRIVACY

The fifth priority issue concerned children having little privacy in the family. Although this issue was raised in only 37 out of the 489 submissions (8%) relating to family/home, this should not detract from the fact that some children's right to privacy was breached in a variety of ways including, parents walking uninvited into their children's bedrooms and/or parents/siblings checking messages on mobile phones and diaries. The issue of privacy in the family was of particular concern to boys 41% of whom mentioned this concern as one of the most pertinent things they considered to be unfair about living in a family. Pupils who were aged 17+ in special educational needs schools were also highly likely to mention the issue privacy as one feature of their family they considered unfair. Typical comments made by pupils who raised the issue of privacy included:

'I love writing in school because that's the only time when I can really write what I feel and I once kept a diary but I was betrayed when someone intruded on it. So I scraped that idea. I think if I got more chances to write, I could say what I feel more…' (Girl aged 11).

'It is annoying when my mum goes into my room and tidies it up and throws out stuff I need. At this time she's probably moseying around in my room. If I want my stuff to be kept in private then that's the way it should be. My parents shouldn't just walk into my room without asking' (Boy aged 14).

ISSUE 6: OTHER

The sixth main issue was made up of all those concerns which were raised by children and young people but which did not fit into any of the other categories. A total of 22 submissions (4%) come under this heading and appeared to relate to single isolated incidents such as extended family living too far away, parents promising their children things but then failing to deliver on their promise.

ISSUE 7: DIVORCE/SEPARATION

Only 3% of children raised the issue of divorce/separation (17 responses out of 489 submissions) as an issue they considered to be unfair in the family. Girls were more likely to raise the issue than boys (53% of girls compared to only 23% of boys) and it was more frequently mentioned by younger children particularly those in key Stages I and II who were aged 5-8 and 9-11 years respectively. This group of children constituted 94% of all those who raised divorce/separation as a concern. Whilst it is unclear whether children and young people raised this issue because of personal experience, the submissions were clear in arguing that children should always be kept informed of the separation process. It was also suggested that children should have a say in whom they live with and in the visiting arrangements that are made for children to see the separated parent. This suggestion was sometimes accompanied by a request for fathers to fully pay child maintenance costs to which the children were entitled. Typical comments raising the issue of divorce/separation included:

'My family is fine, it's just other families. When they decide to split up, children would decide who they stay with! When my parents split I decided to stay with my mum and to see my dada at the weekends. Other children should decide what they want to do' (Girl aged 11).

'In family arguments children should be allowed to tell their parents how they feel about it without getting told off. And if your parents are getting a divorce, you should be told what it's happening and be allowed to decide who they end up with and when they are going to see the other parent' (Girl aged 11).

'My mum and dada are divorced and I know how some people feel. My mummy is a waitress and she doesn't have the best of money and I know I can be greedy. When I was younger my mum wasn't entailed to money because of the government. We were living on bread and water. That's why I believe that a lone parent should be given from the other parent at least £300 pounds a month' (Girl aged 12).

'My family is alright but I think there should be more child benefit money. At the moment it is £10 but I think it should be £30' (Boy age 13).

CHAPTER:

two

EDUCATION

WHAT'S UNFAIR ABOUT SCHOOL?

Children and young people raised a number of issues they considered unfair about school. For the purpose of data analysis, each single issue that a child or young person raised was grouped into one of six main categories. These categories were termed 'having no say in school'; 'work pressure'; 'no say in sports/recreation'; 'bullying'; 'transport'; and 'other' issues. Figure 2.1 below illustrates the percentage of the total 903 submissions, which was assigned to each of the six categories.

## Figure 2.1 Education: Main Issues
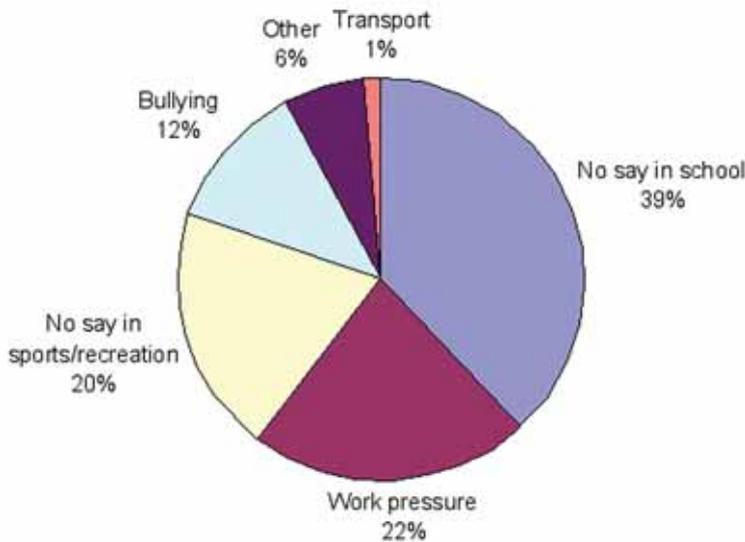
ISSUE 1: NO SAY IN SCHOOL

The most frequently mentioned issue, which children and young people considered most unfair about school was 'having no say' in a wide range of school related matters. Out of 903 submissions, 343 responses (39%) criticised children and young people's lack of power to have their views taken into account on matters affecting their every day experience of school life.

Within this general category,   various specific concerns were raised namely: uniform, communication with teachers, school dinners, school facilities, the design of school rules, subject choice, state of the school building, use of toilets, permission to be off school grounds at break/lunch and promises, which had been broken by teachers. (See Figure 2.2) [4].

Figure 2.2 'No Say In School' - Concerns Raised by Number

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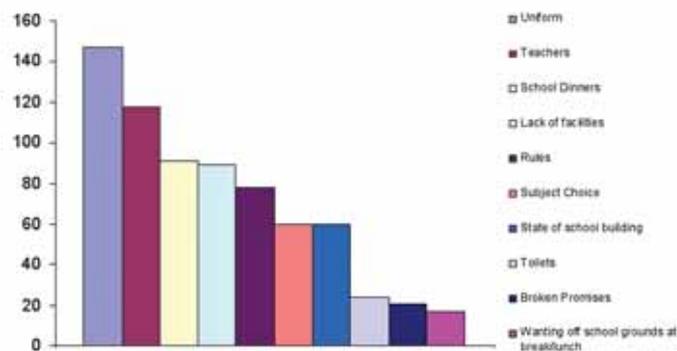
4   These 343 responses raised one or more of the aforementioned issues in the 'no say' category. For illustrative purposes, the bar chart displays the actual number of responses raising each individual issue.

As a means of exploring this data, the following discussion looks at the issues pupils wanted to have a greater say in.

Issues relating to uniform

A total of 147 submissions within the 'no say' category criticised pupils' lack of voice in issues relating to uniform. Most pupils who raised this concern said they did not want to wear a uniform or wanted permission to wear their ordinary clothes on the basis that their uniforms were uncomfortable, drab and boring and were unsuitable for hot weather in summer and cold weather in winter. Girls who were 13/14 years old and who had just recently entered post-primary education were especially likely to complain that their uniforms lacked individuality and that they should at least be given the option of wearing trousers. Among this particular group of girls, those attending secondary schools were more likely than girls in grammar school to suggest that variations in how individual pupils wore their uniform (in regards to unfastened top buttons and varying shirt, tie and skirt lengths) were often a major source of antagonism between pupils and teachers. Typical comments included:

Uniform
Individuality is important because people get Criticised for what school they go to because of their uniform

'I think it is unfair that we have to wear a uniform at school as it is very warm in the summer and teachers are always shouting at you to put your shirt tail in, top button closed make that skirt longer. I think they should get rid of the uniform and just let us wear our ordinary clothes, then teachers wouldn't have to shout and we would be happy' (Girl, 13 years)

'Girls should have the option of wearing trousers because it's not the Bahamas, it's Northern Ireland and it can get really cold here sometimes, especially in winter and the girls are forced to wear skirts which is really unfair' (Girl, 14 years)

Issues relating to Teachers

The second most pressing issue in the 'no say' category raised in 118 submissions to the research related to poor communication between pupils and teachers. Here pupils raised a variety of issues such as; teachers ignore and lack respect for pupils, they treat pupils like children, they do not arrange suitable teaching cover when they are absent, some teachers expectations for pupils are too high whilst others spend too much time disciplining 'bad boys'. Interestingly though, the sentiment most commonly expressed by these pupils was an avid dislike for the favouritism often shown towards particular pupils by individual teachers.

'In our school some of the pupils are treated differently because of who their parents are and if their parents are, for example, the PTA or that. Some teachers treat some people different because of their extra curricular activities - for example, cricketers' (Girl aged 15)

Whilst the issue of favouritism seemed to be an ongoing problem, it was clear that as pupils grew older they were more likely to complain about teachers shouting, teachers ignoring pupils and teachers "always being right". Of noteworthy importance were the numerous observations made about the power differential between pupils and teachers and the lack of compromise or negotiation, which characterised this relationship. Summarising many of these issues, one pupil wrote:

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'Pupils are treated differently. There are two sets of rules, one for teachers and one for pupils. Teachers are allowed to eat in class but pupils are not. Teachers are allowed to drink in class but pupils are not. Teachers are allowed to use mobile phone but we are not. Teachers are allowed to shout at pupils but pupils are not allowed to shout at teachers' (Boy aged 15)

The latter point about teachers shouting at pupils had different effects on their attitudes towards school. Some pupils claimed that this prevented them from seeking further help in class:

'If you want something explained more they always shout at you for not listening and they get really cross. All I wanted was for them to explain it to me so that I understand' (Girl aged 14)

Other pupils remarked that disagreements with teachers automatically positioned the pupil at fault:

'Pupils don't really have a say in school. Teacher's opinions always come first. If there is some sort of an argument between a teacher and a pupil it is more to be the teachers who is seen as telling the truth… e.g. a teacher is convinced you said something bad to them. They are automatically believed, not the pupil' (Girl aged 14).

In a small number of submissions, pupils suggested that the breakdown in channels of communication between pupils and teachers could result in bullying. Pupils who raised this particular issue often referred to the 'power imbalance' between teacher as adult and child as pupil, adding that some teachers took advantage of this simply because they were in a position to do so.

'Sometimes teachers put you down and make a fool of you and if you even attempt to do the same to them we would be punished and the teacher sitting with a smirk on their face. Something should be done… I think that teachers think they are better and higher than you are but they are not' (Girl 13 years).

Issues relating to School Dinners

The third issue raised in the 'no say' category in 91 submissions related to complaints about the school canteen. Most of these comments were negative with criticism often focussing on the choice and 'over inflated' price of the food on offer. Meals supplied in the school canteen were generally described as 'boring' and 'unhealthy' with few schools offering vegetarian and/or fruit dishes. Pupils were particularly likely to criticise the quality and quantity of food offered, a criticism, which led many pupils to ask why they, as the main consumers of these foods, were not consulted on what was available on the canteen menu.

'The first complaint I have about school is the school canteen. The food doesn't taste very nice and it's a rip off! I don't take school dinners often -maybe once a week, and when I do I only eat a bun or biscuit because one portion of chips costs 66p and I counted one time that I only got 11 chips. That's 6p a chip! My friends and I used to take out from the chippy and have a taxi deliver it to the school, but that was stopped because the canteen was loosing money. It's not our fault the food is bloody minging! (Girl aged 14).
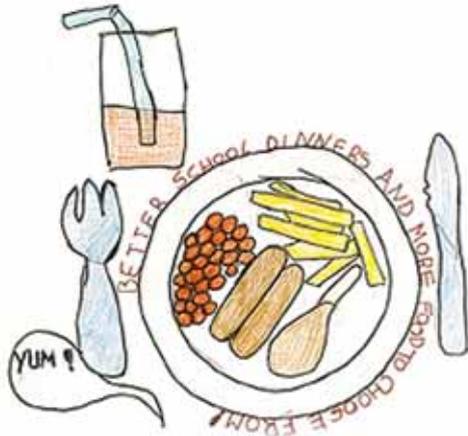
'…I think we should also have a say on what we eat for dinners. In our school there is not a big variety to pick from and due to this I have to go to the tuck shop and eat a load of rubbish' (Girl aged 14).

'…By the way, I am a lad who loves my food and for a cheap price. I think we should get more food for less prices. Empty belly, empty brain. I think we could work harder with more food' (Boys aged 15).

Nill go leor bai ann sa dinnears' There is not enough food at dinners. (Girl aged 10)

A total of 89 submissions referred specifically to the poor state of school resources. Whilst these complaints were raised in only a small number of schools, the fact that this issue was raised at all shows that some pupils may face difficulties securing their right to a full education because of a lack of facilities. The majority of children and young people who wanted better resources for their school did not make outlandish demands but rather couched their requests on the basis that their school experiences should be comparable to that of their peers who were educated in neighbouring schools. Typical comments included:

'We need more facilities for school, more equipment for PE, more instruments for music and in general more things/equipment for other classes like geography, science etc.' (Girl aged 15).

'…The school is in bad condition. There aren't enough facilities for everyone in the school. Most of the teachers are often absent because of depression. There are very poor sports facilities. The windows in the classrooms only open about 5 centimetres so it is very warm and hard to work during the summer months' (Boy aged 14).

The majority of comments relating to resources requested items such as computers, bike sheds, vending machines, more comfortable chairs, and for the heating to be turned on at a reasonable time in the morning during winter. Interestingly, the most popular request made in relation to resources was for more school lockers. Pupils made this request partly for safety reasons (as a means of storing their possessions) but mostly for health reasons as a means of preventing sore backs from carrying bags of heavy books on their shoulders for the duration of the school day. Summarising the main issues raised in regard to resources one pupil wrote:

'In school I would like to see more state of the art computers, more sporting facilities, less exams and more shelter when it's raining. Overall, I would like to see a better building because the one we have now is old, full of graffiti and falling apart. The school should also have lockers to keep your books because after a while the weight of your books starts to hurt your shoulders and back' (Boy aged 15).

Some pupils were of the opinion that improving the school facilities could constitute a small step towards improving relations between teachers and students. In one school, pupils were highly critical at having to sit on the floor because of the consequences that resulted. As one student explained:

'It's annoying in assembly where we have to sit on the floor and the teachers sit on chairs. Sitting on the floor too long is very bad for your back and when we are supposed to be singing we can't because we can't see the words and then whenever we don't sing, teachers shout at us' (Girl aged 11).

In another school, pupils criticised the numerous security cameras, which were positioned around the school on the grounds that these cameras invaded their right to privacy.

Issues relating to Rules

The fourth issue raised in the 'no say' category in 78 submissions relating to unfairness in school raised the issue of having no say in school rules. However, it was not necessarily the case that these pupils objected to school rules per se. Rather, what pupils tended to dislike was not having a voice or say in how those boundaries were determined. In their comments, pupils often questioned the arbitrary nature of the rules imposed upon them, which sometimes seemed to make no sense.

'In our school you're not allowed to run because they say there's not enough room, so why not make it bigger? We have banks but we're not allowed to roll down them, so what's the point in having them?' (Girl aged 11).

'In our school we aren't allowed to run. I think this is unfair because [names another local primary school] has a smaller playground and they are allowed to run' (Boy aged 11).

Related to the above rules (which seemed to be enforced for pupils' safety), was the issue of how the school environment itself can impact on pupils' attitudes towards school. As suggested in the comment below, pupils were quick to point out how putting safety first can have a negative impact on the aesthetics of the learning environment:

'In school we obviously don't have a say on what happens or what rules are made. But I personally think we should… In our school there are grills on our windows. It makes the school like a prison. A fire could start and we could be trapped and we wouldn't be able to get out the windows. I think this is a disgrace and that something should be done about it. From my point of view, pupils should have a say in what happens in their school' (Girl aged 14).

When pupils challenged or criticised their school rules, it was often because they felt these rules were outdated. For example, many pupils criticised the fact that they were not allowed to drink water during class on the grounds that this rule was potentially injurious to their health. Girls were also particularly likely to object to having to wear a skirt especially during the winter months on the basis that this was gender discriminatory.

'In school you are not allowed to wear trousers or jewellery or trainers. I feel that you should be allowed to wear these because it expresses individuality. We are not allowed to have water bottles. But I feel we should be allowed these as you need a certain amount of water a day' (Girl aged 14).

As suggested above, issues relating to uniform and water bottles were often couched in terms of the language of rights, yet this language, in most cases, failed to underpin school rule rhetoric. It is arguable that some pupils regarded the issue of school rules as 'unfair' simply because they did not understand the logic or reasons why particular rules had been enforced. One girl, for example wrote in her story:

'I think that we should be allowed out at lunchtime outside the school grounds because it is too crowded when trying to walk around. I think that we should be allowed to wear make-up because it doesn't do any harm. I think also that we should be allowed to wear reasonable jewellery' (Girl aged 15).

It could be argued that pupils are prevented from leaving their school grounds for their own protection and that rules pertaining to the wearing of make up and jewellery are enforced as a means of upholding high standards of uniform. That many pupils were unaware of the reasons behind rules underpins the need to consult with pupils when drawing up school rules not least because this could potentially reduce resistance among students who may be tempted to challenge a process in which they have no say. As suggested in the comments below, pupils may have very valid ideas for improving the school rule boundaries within which they have to work:

'If the teachers are allowed to smoke in the staff room then pupils should be allowed to smoke as well. It saves the other students from passive smoking when they enter the toilets' (girl aged 14).

'Mobile phones shouldn't be so restricted. I agree that may be they should be turned off during class times. But at break and dinner they should be allowed and it would be better if they weren't confiscated' (girl aged 15).

Issues relating to Subject Choice

The fifth issue raised in the 'no say' category related to pupils' lack of voice in issues relating to subject choice. Sixty submissions to the research raised this particular issue with the tenor and substance of comments relating to subject choice appearing to differ with age. For example, primary school pupils were more likely than pupils in post primary schools to want a say in the subjects they studied each day and the duration of time given to these subjects. Pupils' perceptions of the lack of structured time set aside for academic subjects led to complaints that it was easy for the teacher to overemphasise particular subjects. A typical comment included:

'I think we should have a say in rules and in what subjects we do and when we do the subject' (Boy aged 11).

The bulk of comments relating to subject choice however came from pupils in post-primary schools who were more likely to emphasise the need for 'interesting' subjects and to request better opportunities to develop job-related skills in careers they were interested in pursing. Many of these pupils remarked that the current education system did not take into account that young people often have a wide range of interests - a point they used to emphasise that more needs to be done to make the curriculum and schools more accountable towards meeting all young people's needs. For example, some pupils suggested that substitute teachers should at least have background knowledge of the subject they are covering on the basis that this 'has left some classes having to teach themselves which is definitely no substitute for having a teacher!' (Girl aged 15).
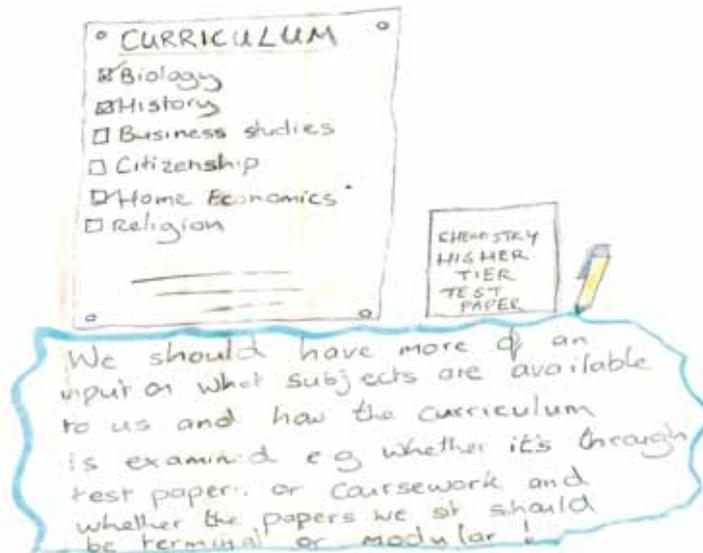
Other pupils remarked that they wanted more of a say in who was assigned to teach particular subjects although pupils raising this specific issue were more likely to criticise who was teaching the subject than the subject itself. Other pupils wanted more freedom to learn about the things that were of interest to them and to be supported in decisions they took which departed from conventional academic pathways. Comments from some of these young people included:

'School is a lot of shit. Young people should decide whether they want to go to school… people should have more freedom in school. If they really have to go to school they should decide on what they learn about. Older people in school should be able to leave school and get a job whenever they want' (Boy aged 15).

'I think that subjects like childcare and development and PE should be offered for GCSE at this school as some people don't like the traditional sports. I think these subjects are more important than German! (Girl aged 15).

'I don't like French and I complain about it every day. I would like someone to give me a straight answer as to why we have to do French and where it's going to get us in the future. I think it's a waste of time while we could be doing some other subject that could be of use to us'. (Boy aged 13).

Issues relating to State of School Buildings

Sixty submissions to the research criticised the physically dilapidated state of school buildings. Whilst it is possible that some pupils may have exaggerated the poor state of their school building, the fact that this issue was raised in a fairly large number of comments raises serious questions as to whether some school buildings were actually fit for human habitation. Among the submissions we received pupils made comments such as:

'The heating is never put on in the morning when it is needed. It's put on in the evening when it isn't needed. The ceiling in the history building leaks right above my table. It's been like this for years. The yard is dirty and when it rains our shoes and uniform get very dirty' (Boy aged 14).

The ceiling in the history mobile is about to fall in at the back and it keeps on dripping. The heating is never turned on in the morning when it's cold. There is a lot of litter and graffiti that makes our area look untidy' (Girl aged 14).

'At the moment I have no problem with school life itself. But the actual school building itself isn't that great. The facilities in PE aren't that great and the state of the schools isn't too great either. There is too much graffiti and chewing gum stuck underneath the tables, left sitting on sideboards and just anywhere you could think of and it is quite annoying and disgusting' (Girl aged 14).

Pupils educated in Irish medium schools were particularly critical of the resources and state of the school building. These students remarked:

To scoli s'againne maith go lear ach nil a lan haiseanna an agus ta an hait ina bhfuil se suite thar a bheith faoin tuath mar sin de nil a lan haiseanna thart orainn. Bionn orainn dul go dti an scoil Bearla chun aiseanna a'acu a usaid. Bionn orainn minibus a fhuil thuas ansin agus glacann se a lan ama. Ba mhaith liom scoil s'againn a bheith nios mo. Our school is good enough but we don't have a lot of resources and the place where it is located is really out in the countryside so we don't have a lot of resources or facilities around us. We have to go to the English school to use their facilities. We have to take a minibus up there and it takes a lot of time. I would like our school to be bigger' (Girl aged 14).

Nil na haiseanna cearta againn mar shampia. Bialann saotharlann. Caithfidh muid dul chuig an scoil eile le cuid ranganna a dheanamh I mBearla m. sh corpaideachas, Teicneolaiocht agus tios: We don't have the proper facilities for example canteen, laboratory. We have to go to the other school to do some classes in English, e.g. PE, Technology and Home Economics. (Girl aged 14).

Níl a lán áiseanna ie fáil sa scoil. Tá boladh ann on feirm in aice leis. Caithimid dul thall ag an scoil mor (scoil Bearla) chun cuid abhár a deanamh. There are not a lot of facilities available in the school. There is a smell from the farm beside it. We have to go over to the big school (English school) to do some subjects (Girl aged 14).

Issues relating to toilets

Concerns regarding the poor state of school toilets were raised in 24 submissions from a small number of schools. Most of these pupils criticised the unhygienic and sometimes vandalised state of both the boys' and girls' toilets, which were variously described as 'gross' and akin to 'prison cells'. Complaints were also lodged about the way access to toilet facilities were restricted to certain times of the day. One pupil for example, wrote in his story:

'My school is alright but the toilets are just never cleaned. They are always dirty and there is urine all over the floor and they are usually blocked. No one would have a s**t in them and when we do need to use the toilet we are only allowed out at lunch and break' (Boy aged 13).

Issues relating to Broken Promises

Although the issue of 'broken promises' was raised in only 21 submissions, which were all from the same school, that this issue was mentioned at all is indicative of the trust young children often invest in adults and the feeling of powerlessness which results when that trust is breached or broken. In this particular case, the primary seven children had been involved in raising funds to help rebuild their school playground. However, work had yet to begin on the playground in spite of these children being promised that the project would be completed by the time they left the school.

'School can be really unfair. We raised £13,000 for a new playground. Peter and I raised 340 of it and we aren't even going to get using it! This is because we are p7's, even though our principal said we would get using it. If our principal thought we wouldn't get using it. Why did he let us raise money? Peter and I think it's really unfair' (Boy aged 11).

Issues relating to wanting off school grounds at break and lunch time

The issue of wanting off school grounds at break and lunchtime was raised in 17 submissions by pupils at a small number of schools. Pupils often justified this request on the grounds that they wanted a better selection of food to eat at lunchtime than was on offer in the school canteen. Yet the interesting suggestion here is that if schools took steps to address the complaints pupils initially raised about their school dinners, then the tension which results from pupils not being allowed off the grounds at break and lunch could potentially be avoided.

ISSUE 2: WORK PRESSURE AT SCHOOL

More than one in five (22%) of all submissions relating to school raised the issue of work pressures incurred through school. Out of all those who raised issues connected with work pressures at school 33% were aged 9-11 years, 35% were aged 12-14 years and 22% were aged 15-16 years. Pupils who were preparing to sit the transfer procedure tests and GCSE's voiced the most ardent criticisms of the imbalance between work and play. These pupils were particularly critical of the expectations placed upon them to achieve highly in exams and to do so by completing what many perceived as a relentless (and unreasonable) amount of class work and homework. Underpinning some comments was resentment that studying took precedence over play and leisure time with criticisms being mounted at the lack of study periods afforded to children during these critical periods and the tendency for longer homework to eat into the time needed for revision and study. Although only a minority of students said they disliked examinations on the basis that tests could positively or negatively label individuals, this point should not underestimate the much more commonly expressed sentiment that there was simply too much home/class work, too many examinations and too much pressure placed on pupils in tests which measured a narrow range of skills. The following comments denote the main issues relating to pressures from school:

'I hate the way that the teachers put so much pressure on us. When it comes to exams they are always putting pressure on us. My parents put pressure on me to do well that makes it even harder to cope with. I don't think we should get much homework especially when the exams are on - we need to revise never mind doing our homework. It is hard to do everything. We need our own free time as well to relax and not worry about anything' (Boy aged 14).

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'We are in school for about 6 hours and then we go home with homework. We are still children so we deserve from free time without having to worry about school or exams. We just need some time to have a bit of fun'. (Girl aged 12 years)

'There are too many tests. They stress the pupils and don't let kids be kids. They test your ability to remember things and not your knowledge' (Girl aged 14).

'I think we get too many tests. End of topic tests, end of year tests, key stage III tests, GCSEs and many, many more. Is there any need for all these tests? You should be judged by your work the whole way through' (Girl aged 14 years)

Underpinning most of the criticisms of work pressure from school was a request for more time for recreational play and rest in the form of having more time for PE, longer lunches and/or a shorter working school day. Pupils who wanted a shorter school day justified this request on the basis that a shorter working day would help improve their concentration levels, which in turn would boost their interest in learning and potentially their success in examinations. Mostly, these pupils just wanted a balance between work and play. To avoid what some pupils termed "information overload", they suggested:

'School days are too long. Six and a half hours is too long plus when young people go home they also have to do homework, which is really extending the school day. I think that pupils would learn more if school began at 11 am and finished at 3.30 because pupils are up and fully awake at 11 and they aren't as tired and so they will be more focused on what they are doing and know what is happening' Girl aged 14).
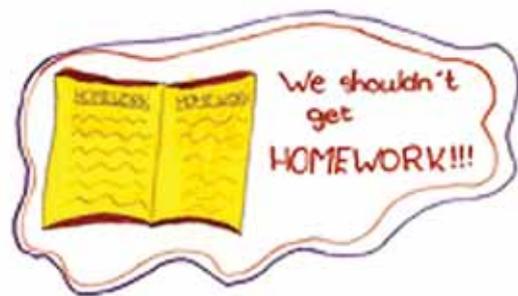
'The school hours could also be improved from 9.10 to 3.40 is too long and then you have homework and revisions for tests for another couple of hours at home. The hours could be 9.30 to 3.00 and to cut homework down. Test should also change. They test pupils on one area and they don't realise that pupils have other talents. They are also very stressful' (Girl aged 14)

'Our school doesn't have enough sports. We have too much work and not enough playing time' (Boy aged 10)

One pupil used recent government rhetoric to argue that that too much schoolwork could be injurious to health. As he put it:

'The government are saying that children today don't get enough exercise. I feel this is because kids have too much homework. No homework at all would be just great, just revision of what you did' (Boys aged 15, original emphasis).

ISSUE 3: NO SAY IN SPORTS/RECREATION

The third main issue pupils considered unfair about school related to pupils' lack of voice in the type of sports offered by their school and choice of after school clubs/trips available to them. A total of 182 out of 903 submissions or one in five submissions (20%) raised this issue. Pupils aged 8-14 years were particularly likely to complain that their sporting equipment was old/outdated; that PE time was often cut short because of class work/exam pressures, and/or; that the sports offered were determined more by the expertise of the teacher/culture of the school than by the needs of the pupils. Boys were particularly likely to complain about having no say in sports/recreation with 47% of boys compared to 26% of girls describing this issue as 'unfair'.

'I don't like school because it's drab and boring. Our gym equipment is bad and useless and our schoolyard has no swings or slides. Our football pitch should have a proper pair of nets and no grating, bad grass or nettles' (Boy aged 9 years).

'Sports facilities annoy me, there's a cricket team and a rugby team but I would like a football team. There's no facilities at the school for football, but there's plenty of people interested in football who don't want to play rugby or cricket' (Boy aged 14 years)

In addition, some girls criticised the gendered nature of the sports/recreation activities offered by their school - an issue that could potentially restrict their opportunity to develop physically and mentally through stimulated exercise.

'In school I don't think its fair that there is a boys football team and no girls team. Also, we are not allowed to play rugby on the pitches. It would also be nice to have a girl's rugby team' (Girl aged 11 years).

'I think we should get better PE equipment. Our cricket pads are years old and don't fit the girls… and the girls should be in more tournaments for sport. We only get one tournament in hockey and cricket and the boys get loads. There should also be more activities such as swimming… The boys get to go to golf clubs and play golf and girls should be given more opportunities like this' (Girl aged 14 years)

Pupils also appeared disgruntled at their lack of say in the types of after schools clubs and school trips that were offered by their school. What emerged clearly from their comments was that the choice of sports offered was often determined by the expertise of the sports teacher/s in charge.

'I think they should give us more after school activities like drama and sport no matter how good or bad you are at it' (girl aged 11)

'There isn't enough sports or games. The clubs aren't very good. We would need a new football club' (Boy aged 9).

'I think that we should get to go on a lot more school trips to things that we enjoy' (Boy aged 13).

ISSUE 4: BULLYING

The issue of bullying in school was raised in 108 submissions (constituting 12% of all issues relating to the theme of school). Although this issue was raised by pupils of all ages, it was especially prominent among the submissions made by young people in special schools and by primary school children. For example, 64% of all of the submissions raising the issue of bullying in school were from children aged 5-11 years and 15% of bullying submissions were from young people in special schools. Whether these two groups actually experience more bullying because they are more vulnerable and/or less able to defend/protect themselves or whether these children were simply more open and honest than older children to thus be able to admit that bullying was a problem, remains unclear. What was clear, however, was that when older children raised the issue of bullying they often did so by acknowledging that this was a problem with short and directive statements such as 'I think more could be done about bullying' or 'There is too many kids being bullied in this school and for no reason at all'.

These statements contrasted with those from younger children who were much more likely to reflect on the loneliness and sense of isolation which often resulted from being bullied:

'In school I get very annoyed and I get treated badly and when I come into school I get my break and go outside. No one likes me and I get blamed and people call me names after school and I do not have any friends' (Boy aged 10).

'Sometimes in school I get bullied by some people and it is annoying because I don't like getting bullied by other people they bully me and I don't even do anything' (Boy aged 9).

'Like many other people I get upset about things. Especially about people making fun about things you like. For example people having a conversation like this:
Child No 1: "What football team do you support?"
*Child No 2: "Liverpool"*
Child No 1: "Ha ha he supports Liverpool, the stupidest team in the whole universe".
Result: Child No 1 feeling good, Child No 2 very upset. Not very nice is it? You hear that all day at [names of school]. Stiffer punishment would sort that out' (Boy aged 11).

Given the emphasis younger children placed on the issue of bullying, it is to some extent understandable that these children were amongst the most likely to criticise the anti-bullying strategies that had been implemented in some schools to address this problem. Their comments often requested better strategies to address bullying such as more supervision in the 'school yard' and 'stricter punishment' for the perpetrator. These were recommended on the basis that official school bullying policies were not capable of effectively addressing the physical and mental form of bullying some children endured at the hands of others.

'…Bullying is another issue to. Schools are going on about bullying and how they're keeping an eye on it but they are doing shit all. They might have a "little talk" with the person and that's it. They need to help and try stop it before it does more damage to people's lives' (Girl aged 14).
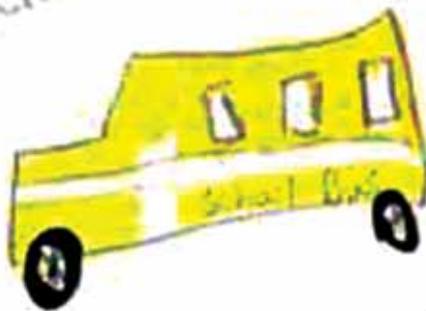
'I think it is unfair when you're playing bullied and there is nothing done about it. The school has put up signs like 'Stop the bully' and 'Say no to bullies' but they don't Do anything to stop them' *(Girls aged 9).*
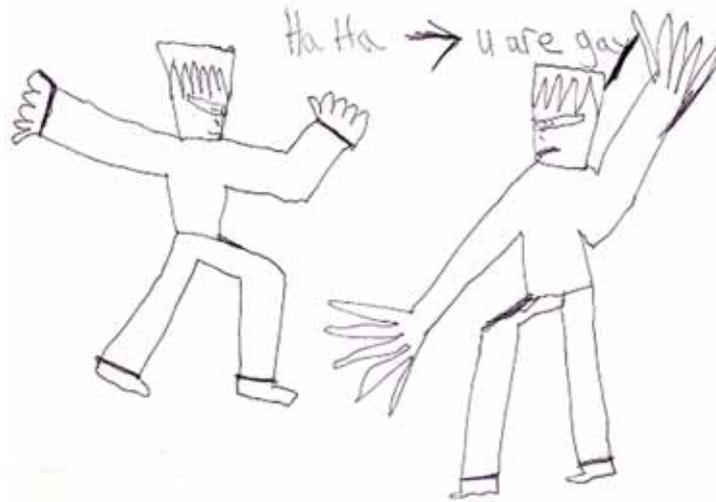
ISSUE 5: TRANSPORT

Although only 13 submissions (1%) raised the issue of school transport, it is important to note that nearly all of these submissions came from children and young people in special schools. These pupils were highly critical of the yellow buses (or the 'custard' or 'banana' buses as they were referred to by children). These buses single out children with special educational needs as different. Children made comments such as 'Get rid of the banana bus' and (as illustrated in the poster below) 'Embarrassed on bus. We hide under the seats'

Other issues regarding transport were largely raised by children and young people living in rural areas many of whom complained about the inaccessibility of bus routes, which they could use to travel directly to and from school. These children reported feeling tired in school on account of rising early so they could travel the long distance to their bus stop, and they raised the issue of safety in the winter months when they had to walk in the dark from their bus stop to their home. Summarising most of the issues raised around transport one girl wrote:

'Our school finishes at 3.15 and we have to sit and wait at the bus deppo until 3.50 for our neighbours then wait for people from another school and I don't get home until 4.04 or sometimes 4.10pm. Counting passengers that our getting home from the shops, and school children, our bus is way over the limit. People are standing and falling over each other, people are struggling to get past one another. Has the deppo ever thought of people who are out of short of breath or nervous? No! It's like a sauna in there. Everyone is jammed in together! My uncle has already been to see about this but has had no results. "If only we had another bus… hint, hint!"' (Girl aged 13).

ISSUE 6: 'OTHER'

The 'other' category' was made up of miscellaneous comments which whilst important in their own right, did not neatly fit into one of the categories of analysis. Issues which fell into this category included complaints about the stigma of attending a secondary school, request for smaller classes and/or more holidays, more information on drugs/contraception, arguments in favour of religiously segregated schooling, complaints relating to girls receiving more football than boys, criticism of schools budget being used to address vandalism of school building and complaints about detention. Because of the very small number of students raising these issues (56 submissions - 6% - were coded under the category 'other' issues) these issues are simply listed rather then analysed.

CHAPTER:

three

PLAY AND LEISURE

WHAT'S UNFAIR ABOUT THE PLAY AND LEISURE FACILITIES?

Almost all of the 620 submissions relating to play and leisure criticised the existing sport, leisure, entertainment and recreational facilities available to children and young people in their local communities. Three key factors appeared instrumental in deterring children and young people from accessing their right to play and leisure. The first factor related to the issue of access. Among the concerns raised were issues relating to the lack of age appropriate play/leisure facilities in their area; concern about discrimination on the basis of age, disability and locality; and concern about the consequences that can arise because of a lack of suitable entertainment facilities. The second main factor curtailing children's right to play and leisure related to the issue of safety. Here children and young people criticised the dilapidated and vandalised state of many of the current play facilities and they expressed concern about their safety when using particular parks and public play spaces which were frequented by older youths. The third main factor effecting play and leisure opportunities related to participation and the obstacles children and young people often encounter when play parks are demolished usually on account of the demand for housing space and commercial development. The percentage of submissions, which came under each category, is depicted in figure 3.1 below.

Figure 3.1 Play and Leisure: Main Issues
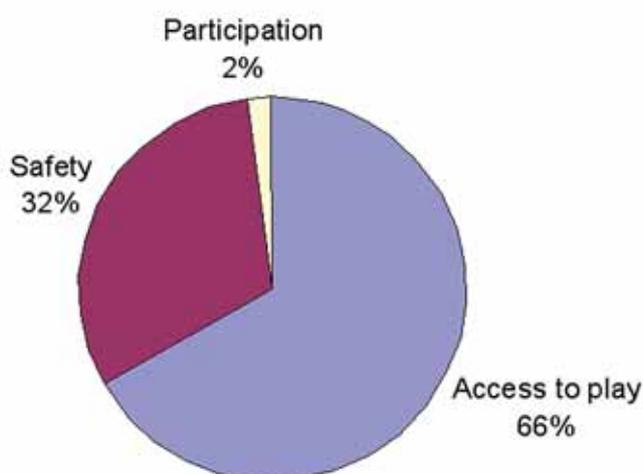
ISSUE 1: ACCESS TO PLAY

Out of 620 submissions relating to the issue of play and leisure, 412 responses (66%) raised the issue of access. That two out of three submissions expressed concern about accessing play and leisure facilities is a significant finding, not least because it highlights the dearth of leisure facilities available to children and young people. For example, of all those raising the issue of access 26% were aged 9-11 years, 31% were aged 12-14 years and 30% were aged 15-16 years. Pupils aged 14-16 were particularly likely to criticise the recreational amenities available for teenagers and pointed out that they were too young to work legally and so had few alternatives to keep them occupied. Typical comments from these young people included:

'My area is a complete and absolute joke! If something happened the teenagers would get blamed. There's no life about it at all. There is a youth club, which is only for primary sevens and apart from that there's nothing. Teenagers aren't allowed in although the parish priest says that the doors are always open. There's absolutely no activities for us at all!' (Girl aged 14).

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'There is a lot of public places for adults and over 18s like bars. There are no places for younger ones to socialise' (girl aged 15).

'My area could do with some new shops etc. Or better facilities. The community should come up with better summer schemes with more trips. There's not much to do round my area. Nothing much happens. Basically I do the same thing every day. Nothing happens until the summer comes and then I go out to a summer scheme for trips. If I was working I'd work all summer because I've nothing better to do. People who are bored cause trouble just to have a lot of fun and some people go on holiday or sit in the house all day playing the play station' (Boy aged 15).

Younger children also shared the sentiment of boredom and frustration although the nature of the obstacles preventing them from accessing play and leisure facilities were slightly different. For example, it was not necessarily the case that there were no play parks available for younger children. Rather, children complained that they could not access these parks either because they had no adult to supervise them or because the park was not within a safe waking distance. The issue of age also affected the type of facilities, which children could access. Children who no longer wished to play in parks often encountered difficulties accessing other facilities such as the swimming pool and the gym. Sometimes they were refused access on the basis of their height, other times they were refused access on the basis of age. The seemingly arbitrary grounds on which access to use particular facilities was refused proved frustrating for a small, but vocal number of children who made comments such as:

'I think age restriction is unfair because I'm only 11 but I can't get into Indiana land because I'm tall for my age. I think it should be what age you are and not your height' (Boy aged 11).

'Children are denied loads of things because they are under age. Like in swimming you have to be 12 to go swimming on your own. I think we should have some sort of licence to let us do it if we're capable' (Girl aged 11).

The suggestion that access to use particular facilities should be determined by competence as opposed to height or age was also echoed by young people who wished to use the facilities in the gym.

'… Another think that annoys me is where I live is that there is nothing to do for young people so they hang about the streets and get into trouble. Also, the age at which young people are allowed to do things. Young people under 16 can't do anything in leisure centres e.g. use the gym. This should be moved to 13 because that is when you are a teenager and more responsible' (Girl 14)

'During my time at the swimmers we tried to go to the gym but we were knocked back by a worker who approached us and said, "Get back up to the other part of the building because you are underage, you have to be sixteen to be over here". Also, the football pitches are water logged and vandalised by hooligans around our area and we need more facilities. To go to a pitch where I live I would have to travel' (Boy aged 14).

The latter remark raises an important issue, namely the restrictions often placed on young children, who may be unable to travel to venues outside their local community for play and recreation purposes on account of safety issues, travel and admission costs. The cost of accessing play and leisure centres was raised generally by children below the age of 16 who were too young to support themselves financially, and specifically by children who were from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds. One typical comment included:

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'In my area there is nothing to do - it is absolutely boring. We would like to have some leisure centres because there is noting to do. We would like just to chill out in a leisure centre and have a bit of crack. We can't go into leisure centres because we are either too young or don't have the money. We shouldn't be paying for stuff to have fun. It is not fair. We should just be allowed in to have a good day' (Boy aged 12).

Children from relatively deprived backgrounds may be doubly disadvantaged from accessing their local play and leisure facilities on account of their age and social class. This point has particular relevance for young, working class children and young people living in rural areas most of whom rely on public transport to access leisure and recreational facilities. Indeed, children of all ages living in rural areas were particularly critical of the lack of general amenities and leisure facilities that they could use. These children made comments such as:

'… We have to travel outside of our own town to have fun and it costs money - money that a lot of teenagers don't have'.

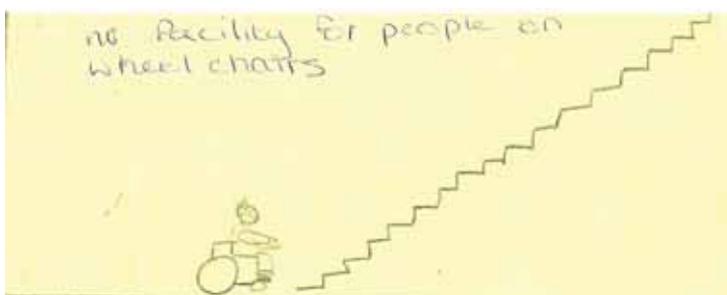*'Leisure facilities. What leisure facilities? There's none to talk about?'* (Boy aged 15)

'We need more facilities. In the summer and at weekends there is nothing a child of my age can really do. To be honest, in my home village you get a bus to the cinema but it doesn't leave you home directly. I live just a few miles out of my home village and so I have to get my parents to come and collect me.' (Girl aged 15).

'There are three bars where I live and three chipies. No leisure centres, no cinema, nothing for 14-18 year olds. There's a youth club but that for younger kids. What are we going to do - drive 15 miles to Omagh?' (Girl aged 14).

On the back of the picture opposite, the child who drew this picture wrote 'There's no parks near me just cows and fields'.

Age, social class and locality were not the only factors to influence access to play and leisure facilities. Disability also emerged as a key factor influencing access. For example, children and young people in wheel chairs expressed their frustration at the lack of suitable play and leisure activities, which they could engage with. These particular pupils complained about the choice and variety of leisure facilities offered to them. The drawing below illustrates this point with a simple but direct message.

The general lack of play and leisure facilities in Northern Ireland appeared to have three main effects on children and young people. Firstly, a large number of submissions to the research directly linked the issue of anti-social behaviour with the lack of age appropriate leisure facilities. Pupils admitted that boredom resulting from having 'nothing to do' led them, or their peers, to engage in fights, smoking and/or drinking binges because it gave them 'something to do'.

'I think that the leisure and pastimes are crap because we have nothing to do and because we have nothing to do we drink which is illegal but if we had a place to go to I guarantee that the drinkers would cut down' (Girl aged 16).

'We like to hang out and go to places but if there isn't anywhere to go we drink which is fun because our group doesn't cause damage and know when they've had enough but we would drink less if there was more to do' (Girls aged 15).

'I think that the government should pay people just to cover youth clubs. The youth club I have gone to for the past 5 years closed down just last week because the man who run it for the past 20 years has finally retired from doing it as he is too old. Most of the boys who would have gone to the youth club will probably now get into drinking' (Boy aged 15).

What these comments suggest is that teenage boredom can easily lead to young people engaging in drinking, drugs and vandalism, a sentiment that was expressed in one form or another in almost all of the submissions received from young people who raised the issue of 'access'. However, it was not just bored teenagers who 'got into trouble' on account of the lack of play and leisure facilities in their areas. Younger children who liked playing ball games also reported getting into trouble with neighbours on account of the lack of space where they could play ball. Indeed the second major problem arising from the lack of adequate play and leisure facilities concerned the safety of children who were forced to play beside busy roads as a means of avoiding confrontations with neighbours who objected to footballs being kicked around the streets. Children who raised this issue remarked:

'At home when I'm playing with my ball there is two old ladies called Mrs X and Miss K. Whenever the ball goes into Mrs X's garden she won't give it back to me. Once when my little brother was playing with the ball it went into Miss K's garden and she said to my mum that she would ring the council about my little brother. And now I have nowhere to play' (Boy aged 9).

'Outside my house there is a grassy area. Me and the other boys who live near it always play football on it. But there's a man who tells us not to play on it or to play beside the road which is quite busy and the ball always goes on the road' (Boy aged 11).

'In my areas it has no playing facilities or anything to do. There are no places where we can play football or just run about and play something else. It is just all roads and nowhere to play. It could be dangerous towards young children who want to play and they would go onto the roads and get knocked down and get hurt or even killed. All the facilities are too far away from where we actually live' (Boy aged 14).

'Outside school I would like to see more football pitches because in the summer I am always playing football with my mates and we play out in the street and once one of us were to hit a car or a hedge they would come straight out to tell us to move on or else phone the police' (Boy aged 11).

'In my area there is nothing to do. Old people always complain when you're trying to do something like play football at the weekends. There is nothing to do so people in my area stand about on street corners smoking and drinking' (Boy aged 15)

The third main issue arising, in part, from the lack of age appropriate play/leisure facilities was that pupils sometimes felt obliged to take up traditional sporting activities simply because the resources and support were there to play these games. In Northern Ireland games such as cricket and rugby have traditionally been associated with Protestant culture whereas Camogie and hurling have traditionally been associated with Catholic culture. Whilst the need for a greater variety of sports such as American football and ice hockey were raised by children from both sides of the religious divide, there were some suggestions in the data that some Catholic pupils who played traditional sporting games did so more by default than by choice.
Typical comments included:

'There isn't many sports or leisure facilities in my area. There are only places to play football or Gaelic. There are no facilities for other sports like basketball, ice hockey and skateboarding. There are leisure ventures but they are hard to get into and they're expensive' (Girl aged 15).

'There is absolutely nothing to do except for Gaelic football which I love but in Gaelic football, it doesn't matter if you're good or not, it's all about who you are and who you are related to. I would love for netball, basketball and Camogie to be set started in my local area because when football's off there is nothing for us to do - that's why we get into trouble' (Girl aged 14).

'A lot of the facilities (not many!) in this area are housing a stereotype as to what children like to do. GAA plays a major part in leisure time here but as I am one of the people not really into sports I am left with nothing to do unless I travel miles to somewhere like, Belfast or Derry' (Boy aged 14).

Related to the issue of religion was the issue of segregated social space. Although only four pupils mentioned this issue, this figure should not detract from the wider implications, which shared play, and leisure facilities for young people could have on building bridges across the sectarian divide. Pupils commented:

'I cannot go down to my local park because it is only the other religion. If we go down there, there will probably be a fight or we will be thrown out' (Girl aged 14).

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'There is not enough leisure facilities in {names of town] and the ones that there is I can't use because I am Protestant and a lot of people know who I am. If I was to use it I would be harmed' (Boy aged 15).

One potential consequence of having nowhere to play was that children's health could be endangered. Indeed, it is interesting that a minority of children explained their weight problems as arising from a lack of exercise. These children commented:

'There isn't enough leisure centres and the health is bad because not enough people are getting enough exercise that they should be getting. For example in [name of town] there is only one leisure centre and it is always packed with these swimmers in the gala and the public isn't allowed in when they want to go in' (Girl aged 12)

'Our town has been telling us for years that they are having to build us a leisure centre and they still haven't built us one yet and its is so annoying. We are eating too much sweets and there is not enough sports and something to do and we are all putting on lots of weight. [name of town] has a tennis court and some playing grounds but it needs things that people can just go and play and not have to join a club to actually play' (Girl aged 12)

Another young child wrote on the back of this picture, 'There's nothing to do but watch football'.

As illustrated above children and young people had a number of complaints about the play and leisure facilities in their area. In light of this data it was interesting and perhaps somewhat surprising that most of the suggestions forwarded to rectify this problem were low key in the sense that children and young people simply wanted a fun and safe place where they could hang out with their friends. Rather than opting for multiple amusement parks or expensive waterslides complexes, children and young people used their imagination to suggest practical ways to make their area more leisure 'people' friendly. Suggestions included:
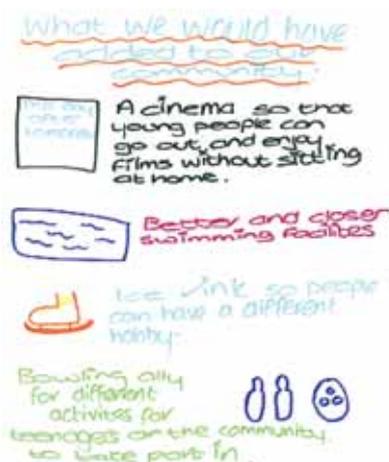
'I really hate the way the park near to me has a mass of green and there is not a thing on the grass. I think there should be rugby posts or a cricket pitch. Also there is a forest near me and there is nothing in it. There should be a skate park/bmx park with ramps and things…' (Boy aged 11)

'I think our swimming pool in the local leisure centre should have slides and activities instead of just swimming all the time' (Girl aged 14).

*'There should be better parks in the mid Ulster area
and people should not wreak them. In parks there
should be special walls made for people who want
to graffiti them so they will write on the wall and not
on someone else's property' (Boy aged 14)*

*'My area/community doesn't have anything in it.
It's boring as hell. I would love to see a community
centre where kids and people my age can go
somewhere without getting hassled by adults or the
police' (Boy aged 15).*

ISSUE 2: SAFETY

Just under one third of all submissions (31%) relating to the theme of play and leisure raised the issue of safety. Here concerns were expressed about the dilapidated state of current play/leisure facilities and the potential for children to injure themselves whilst using public park equipment. Concern was also expressed about the safety of young children in parks used by older teenagers as a place to drink alcohol. The majority of these comments came from children aged 9-11 years. Safety may have been a particularly pertinent issue to this age group of children because they may have felt too grown up to want/need an adult to supervise their play in the park but yet were too young to use the facilities in their local leisure on their own. Girls were substantially more likely than boys to admit to feeling unsafe when accessing play and leisure facilities with 59% of girls compared to 23% of boys raising this issue. The following comments sum up the main issues relating to safety in play and leisure activities:

'The streets are very dirty and there is glass and glass bottles lying everywhere. Also, a lot of people stand about the streets smoking and drinking alcohol. Also there is a lot of stray dogs wondering about and they are making the streets dirtier and the youth club is not that good. The park does not have a lot of things to do and it is all rubbish and full of dog faeces' (Boy aged 14).

'The park in my area is vandalised. The swings have been burned. There is graffiti on the climbing frame. The climbing frame is small and boring. We would like a bigger one to play on. The swings have been replaced with baby swings. There should be a water park' (Boy aged 13)

'My story is about the playing facilities. Every time we go in the park, the park wardens have taken something away. They told us they were going to bring the equipment back but they didn't. When we try to play on the football pitch we can't because there's glass everywhere and the cleaners won't touch it. And at night when it's Christmas time when it gets dark early, you can't play in the park. I think there should be lights because you can't see. I also think the park fence should be larger. It's small and easy to break. We always get hurt and it's a really bad play park. No wee children can play, it's a real shame because they all want to play and we can't and we end up having to play on the street where we get shouted at. We can't play nowhere' (Girl aged 11).

'Where I live there are quite a few parks nearby but there's just one problem. I go to one and it's full of people screaming, swearing and drinking. I think it is appalling. And to make it worse, they leave beer cans and bottles lying around and it is so dangerous. They smash them against the wall and don't clean it up. And they write very rude things all over the playing equipment' (Girl aged 11).

The above picture of a play park littered with broken bottles and chewing gum, where the play equipment was covered in graffiti and occupied by older youth who engaged in drinking and swearing was not unusual. Images such as these dominated the submissions relating to safety in the play park - an issue many young children wanted tackled and solved.
Typical comments included:

'I wish there was no vandalism in the local parks as local children cannot enjoy themselves'
(Boy aged 13)

'Where I play is swings that are burnt down and it is very unfair for the little one s who like playing on them' (Girl aged 10).

'Our local town has gum all over the footpaths and beer cans all over the beach. There is a lot of drunk people in the street and scare young children who are walking by. In some of the swing parks there are glass bottles and I think this is dangerous for young children' (Girl aged 11).

'I go to my granny's everyday after school but when I go to walk home in the dark there seems to be drunks in the corners and people taking drugs. So I run as fast as I can to get home. I think there should be some cameras to watch for this and stop it. The graffiti on the wall is appalling. I want this stopped and all the old graffiti taken off or painted over' (Boy aged 13).

'Tá duine agus bíonn se ag ol an t-am ar fad agus cuireann se eagla orm' (There are people and they drink all the time and they scare me' (Girl aged 10).

A small number of children claimed to have injured themselves whilst playing on public park equipment. As suggested in the comments below, broken bottles embedded in the grassy areas had the potential to stop children's play in various ways:

'The estate that I live in has not much things to do. It is f***ing sh***. After school I go home and get ready and go out to play football. In the field there is glass, stones and other things on the grass. I fell and cut my leg one-day'. (Boy aged 13).

'The swings are broken and you can't go on them. Glass is lying everywhere. For example you're going out to play football and you can't kick the ball or you will bust it' (Girl aged 9).

These problems prompted a small number of children and young people to suggest better security for play parks such as better lighting, more security cameras, and a park warden to safeguard the park at night. Others made a request for broken bottles to removed from park areas, for graffiti to be sprayed over, and for play equipment that was broken or vandalised to be replaced. Without taking action such as this, more young children could potentially injure themselves in public play parks.

ISSUE 3: PARTICIPATION

The third and final category in the theme of play/leisure related to children's participation in the design and layout of play and leisure facilities. Although only 2% of children and young people raised the issue of participation, the small size of this figure is itself significant given the generally high levels of discontent displayed by children and young people with the play and leisure facilities currently available across Northern Ireland. The main issue raised under the category of participation was the way play parks are often removed to make way for housing and commercial development. This process seemed to occur without any consultation with the children and young people who used this public facility. Children who had been previously involved in decision making processes concerning park land were highly sceptical of the attention that had been paid to their views. This, in fact, led some children to question why they should bother to be involved in our consultation process when nothing had come from previous consultations in which they took part. Typical comments included:

'There was a park beside me and they took it away and built flats' (Boy aged 11).

'There is a perfect area to play in and it's been there for years. You come back the next day and the government have dug it up. It takes them for ages to finish it and when they start something it can sit there for years and after four years they make a start on it' (girl aged 11).

'I think it is unfair because all the parks are closed and where we used to play football is closed and lots of houses are being built' (Boy aged 10).

*'I would really like a decent park. I told everybody yesterday that I was going to this today and there was about 20 of us said 'Say to them about a park' and I said okay. Like this is f*****g ridiculous. We were promised a park seven years ago and we were let down. I know this time it's going to be the same. We will just get let down the same way. Our estate is shit there is nothing to do, all we do is sit in the house because there is shit all of to. I really want something exciting'. (Boy aged 13)*

*'What really annoys me about our estate is there is not enough facilities or playgrounds. It f****** bores the b*****s of me. We have been getting promised stuff for years. The government are a bunch of w******. They talk shit. I remember when I was in p5 the architects came in and asked us what we wanted. We wrote down that we wanted a football pitch with nets and astro turf. We were promised a big nature trail with a tree hut in the forest. We were promised a pond with fish in it and we were promised a climbing frame and a new football pitch and better equipment but as f***ing usual, they didn't build it' (Boy aged 13).*
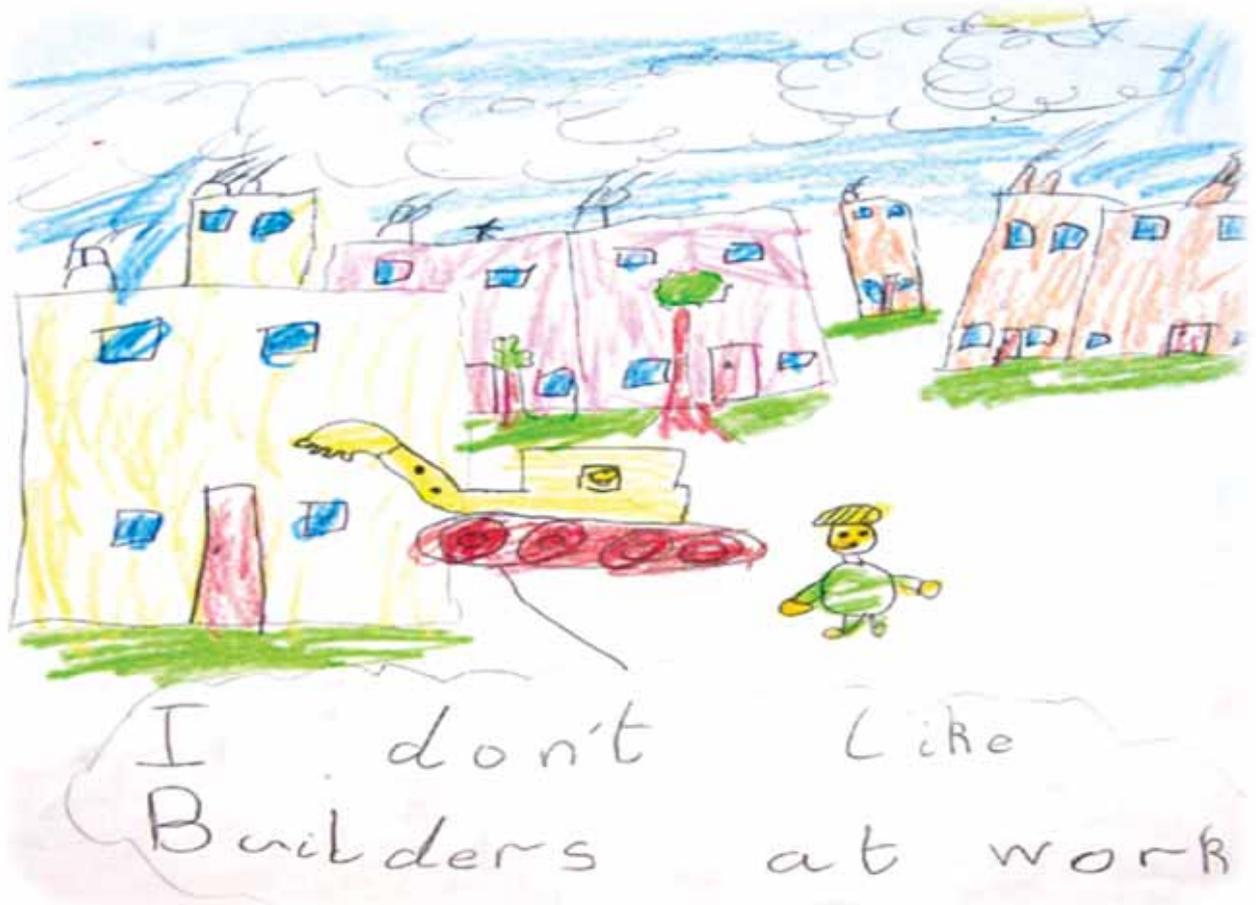
Article 12 of the CRC requires meaningful and effective consultation with children in relation to the decisions, which affect them. Comments such as those above suggest that consultations and data gathering exercises in relation to play and leisure facilities fall short of what is required.
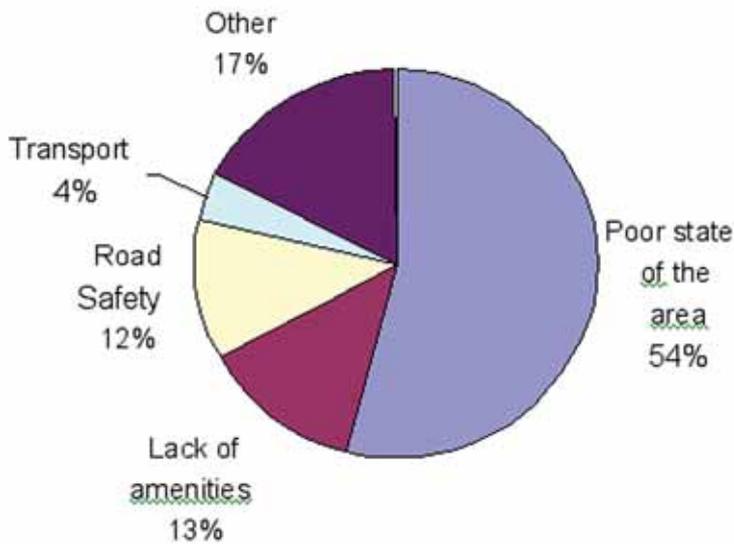
CHAPTER:

four

AREA

WHAT'S UNFAIR ABOUT YOUR AREA OR COMMUNITY?

When asked about the things children and young people might consider unfair in their local area/community, five main issues emerged as key concerns. These included issues about the 'poor state of the area'; the general 'lack of amenities'; concerns about 'road safety'; 'transport'; and 'other' issues[5]. Figure 4.1 below illustrates the percentage of the total 506 submissions relating to the theme of area/community, which were assigned to the various categories.

Figure 4.1 Area: Main Issues


The following poster was typical of many of the issues young people raised about their area/community.

5   There may be some overlap between this chapter and the previous one on Play and Leisure. This is because children were asked about each of these issues separately and it was felt to be important that the extent and breadth of their responses was represented in this report.

ISSUE 1: POOR STATE OF THE AREA

As illustrated in the pie chart above, the main issue which dominated children and young people's concerns about their area/community was the generally poor and dilapidated state of the vicinity in which they lived. Overall, 272 submissions raised this particular concern (54%) with children aged 9-16 being among the most likely to take notice of, and comment on, the poor upkeep and maintenance of their area. Children and young people listed a number of complaints the majority of which criticised the rubbish, chewing gum and broken bottles, which littered their streets. Added to these general concerns were criticisms of individuals who smashed up bus stop shelters and phone boxes or who wrote graffiti on public and private property. Questions were also asked about the lack of footpaths on busy roads to facilitate pedestrian access. Underpinning these submissions was a sense that many children and young people wanted to feel proud of the area/community in which they lived and to this end they questioned the motives of people who destroyed the area through mindless acts of vandalism, or who did not care about the rubbish they threw on the street or who were content to let old houses go to wreck and ruin. Typical comments included:
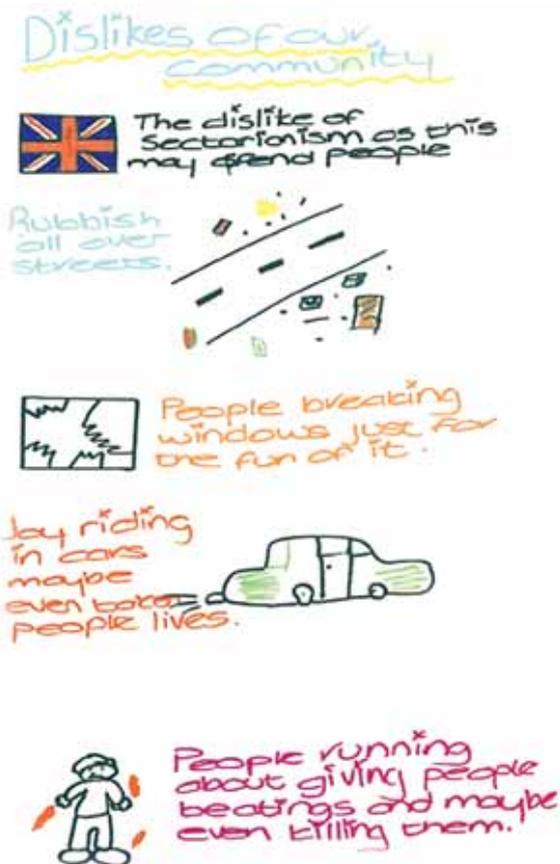
'One thing that really annoys me and gets on my nerves is the area that I live in. Nearly everywhere around the place there is graffiti or vandalism. If I ever look at the bus stop I usually see writing all over the glass saying bad things or occasionally I see shattered glass at the bus stops. I really think my street should take much better care. Since I never see bad people doing this they must do it at night. I once heard people jumping on the top of a bus trying to vandalise it… The people who do this are just trying to be very cruel. At a park, which I live close to, I once went there with my friend and I saw bad boys and girls with a spray and they spayed it all over the slide so that it would get all over people if they went down it. My friend and I sat on a bench and watched them. They saw us looking towards them and they started swearing at us. This was at night and there was no-one else there' (Boy aged 11).

I think the most annoying thing about being a child is the area. I hate it when I see smashed bus stops, graffiti and beer bottles everywhere. Another thing is that there is litter on the ground not far away from the nearest bi. Another thing is that on the footpath there is chewing gum spat out and there is a fine of £50 for it. There is also a fine for dog poo being left lying on the street but nobody pays attention to it' (Girl aged 11).

'The streets are very dirty and there is glass bottles lying everywhere. Also, a lot of people stand about the streets smoking and drinking alcohol. Also, there are a lot of stray dogs wondering about and they are making the streets dirtier. The park doesn't not have a lot of things to do and it is all rubbish and dog species' (Boy aged 14).

Although children and young people from all parts of Northern Ireland raised these general issues, it was clear that some communities were in a much poorer state than other communities. For in addition to voicing concerns about issues relating to rubbish, chewing gum and dog poo, children and young people living in predominantly working class areas also commented on the risks they had to endure from joy riders, drug and alcohol pushers who often frequented their area. One young person wrote in their story:

'In [name of area] there is too much rubbish lying about everywhere and blue bags. There are stolen cars lying about in the streets. Wee drunks are sitting about all over the place and it's very scary to see for children. There are a lot of drugs being sold in their area like glue bags are everywhere. Scumbags are a big problem here. Starting fights for nothing and just beating people up for no reason. Graffiti is terrible and it's all over people's fences and walls. Drink is a serious problem here!!!! (Girl age 15).

This comment was not atypical in the sense that it raised more wide-ranging concerns about how children and young people's general well being, health and safety could potentially be jeopardised because of the area in which they live. In relation to the safety issue, concerns were raised about young children cutting themselves because of broken glass littering the streets or being knocked down by joy riders, which is just as likely to happen during the daytime as at night. Some children and young people also expressed fear that their constant exposure to drugs and alcohol could lead to recreational drug use being regarded as normal. Others simply chose to reflect on the negative effect which living in a poor, vandalised and unsafe housing estate had on their mental well-being:

'Area is definitely one of my worst things I hate. Our area is so dirty. It's not nice to live in. The street cleaners don't care. It's embarrassing to live in. There are too much stolen cars. This all happens in my area and we want something done about it. Too much drugs and vandalism'. (Girl aged 15).

Criticisms of the poor state of their area were often accompanied by requests or tangible suggestions for action, which could be taken to rectify these problems. These included increasing the number of bins to aid with waste disposal, increasing the frequency with which these bins were emptied, replacing dull street lights with brighter lighting, enforcing stricter fines against owners who allow their dogs to foul the pavement, providing more road sweepers and recycling banks. Although some of these solutions were obvious and simple, the fact that they were proposed by children and young people would suggest that there is a willingness on the part of the younger generation to improve the standard of living in their areas as a means of making their communities somewhere they can be proud to call home.

ISSUE 2: LACK OF AMENITIES

A total of 67 out of 506 submissions (13%) were made under this category. The majority came from teenagers living in rural areas and they particularly criticised the range of amenities available in their environment. Two issues emerged as being of particular concern. The first issue referred to the absence of appropriate clothing and music shops and the lack of bowling alleys and cinemas, which could cater to the needs of young people living in the countryside. Many of these young people complained that they had to travel long distances to access leisure facilities such as shops and cinemas often on a limited pocket money budget. When they arrived at their destination, their leisure time was often synchronised in accordance with the bus timetable the result of which meant that precious nights out with their friends often had to be cut short. As one girl explained:

'I have to go into Omagh if I want anything half way decent to wear. And half the time the buses don't go because it's a bank holiday or a Saturday! It wouldn't be as bad if we actually had something to do here. We have a cinema 15 miles away but we have to get a bus. To get a bus to see a film at 8-9.30 we get the bus at 6.20 and home at 10.45' (Girl aged 15).

Another girl recommended:

'They should have transport in every town because it is not fair for some town to have in and not others. So transport should be for everyone' (Girl aged 15).

School children living in rural areas often had to rely on their parents driving into the town to collect them from the local bus stop or bus station. Some teenagers, however, felt that this arrangement meant they had little independence from their parents to socialise with their friends.

The second main issue raised in relation to the lack of available amenities concerned the recent closure of the main hospital at Omagh and the transfer of services to Fermanagh. School children living in the Omagh area were particularly critical of this move. They complained that the hospital closure had resulted in unemployment rising in the area and had the potential to endanger lives by increasing waiting lists for treatment and inflicting unnecessary travel discomfort onto those who living in the Omagh area who were now forced to travel long distances to receive necessary medical help. Pupils who criticised the closure of the hospital in Omagh area often couched their frustrations in personal stories similar to the two comments recounted below:

'The hospital is going to be very far away for us to travel to Fermanagh. When I had appendicitis I went to Omagh casualty. They sent me to another hospital really far away. I was in pain the whole way there that night. When I got to Enniskillen they told me that I shouldn't have waited so long because if I had my appendix would have burst and poisoned my blood. Omagh couldn't even take me so I had to travel a further hour to get to Enniskillen. There is no maternity ward either'.

'One issue I feel very strongly about is my hospital which is soon to be closed down. I am always injured mainly with sprained ankles and having the hospital there was always a blessing, but if it's shut I'll have to travel a far distance to check up on my ankle. Also my sister works in the hospital and soon she'll be out of a job. My cousin had a baby recently and had to go to another hospital to have it. That was all right but she had an accident with her baby and it was very serious and she had to travel a really long distance to see a specialist' (Girl aged 15).

ISSUE 3: ROAD SAFETY

A total of 59 out of 506 submissions (12%) relating to area/community raised the issue of road safety. Almost two thirds of those who raised this particular issue (62%) were under 11 years of age. Most of the submissions with the issue of road safety were quite short and to the point. One boy aged 8 remarked, 'My area is unsafe - I have only got a straight road with dangerous corners' whilst another young girl remarked:

'In my area there is no grass to play on so sometimes we have to go down to the local park but the road we have to cross is really dangerous and there is no traffic lights to help us cross the road' (Girl aged 11).

Although the issue of road safety was raised in only a small number of submissions, this should not detract from the seriousness of the concerns expressed. That 59 submissions from children and young people chose to raise issues such as the lack of traffic lights in their area to monitor traffic, the absence of zebra crossings and the lack of speed ramps to deter cars which drive too fast through their neighbourhoods would suggest that some children have grave concerns that their safety could be compromised because of the lack of adequate safety measures.

ISSUE 4: TRANSPORT

Unlike the issue of road safety, concerns expressed about transport (raised in 20 submissions - 4%) centred predominantly on the limited and infrequent bus and train services which operated between major cites and rural towns. As children grew older, so too did their frustrations with the current transport system with 70% of these submissions coming from young people aged 14-16 years. Teenagers living in rural areas were amongst the most ardent critics of the transport system. These young people not only criticised the limited bus and train services available, but they also voiced concern that bus routes only accessed main roads which often resulted in teenagers having to wait by the side of dark roads for their parents to collect them. One fairly typical comment was:

'There's no leisure here as it's out in the country. The only leisure we get to is the cinema and the swimming pool in the nest nearest big town. A bus does come some night of the week to go to the cinema but it has set times when leaving. It leaves at 10pm so we can't even see a long film or the bus will leave. The bus doesn't even leave us home to our houses. We end up being left at our village and then having to get our parents to get in the car and lift us' (Girl aged 15).

Also included under the category of transport were concerns about the poor quality of the roads in rural areas. Some children blamed the recurring emergence of potholes along newly tarmac roads on the slurry tractors, which used these routes to transport their goods. Although only 5 submissions raised this particular issue, the poor state of the roads in rural areas could have implications for the safety of roads users in those areas which do receive the same amount of funding donated to the upkeep of more mainstream roads.

'This might sound silly coming from a 15 year old, but the roads are in a terrible shape. The government spend too much fucking money on highways that don't need it as 'back roads' have pit holes that are in need of desperate repair' (Boy aged 15).

ISSUE 5: 'OTHER'

The 'other' issues category which made up 17% of all submissions, raised a number of issues the most prominent of which was bullying. Although the issue of bullying was most often raised in a classroom context or in the family and thus was most likely to be coded under the general themes of school or home, incidents of bullying in neighbourhoods were also reported and recorded under the theme of area. Although the pupils who raised the issue of bullying tended to make short comments such as 'I think it's unfair when older people bully around my cul-de-sac' remarks such as this serve as a reminder that bullying can occur in all types of locations and can take various forms. One other issue included in the 'other' category was the tendency for shopkeepers to serve adults before children. One 11 year old girl wrote in her story, 'In our area if you are waiting to be served in a shop, people push in front of you. Either that or the shop assistant completely ignores you' a sentiment that was shared by other younger children. Young children

who lived in rural areas also voiced concerns about ongoing commercial development projects in rural areas which they claimed was ruining the aesthetics of living in the countryside whilst older children who similarly shared the countryside criticised the poor mobile phone reception which they received in their local areas.

five

CRIME AND POLICING

IMAGES OF CRIME AND POLICING

The final chapter considers submissions from children and young people, who were asked to write, draw and/or talk about the images that came to mind when they heard the words 'crime' and 'police'. Five main issues emerged from the data. When placed in order of frequency with which they were mentioned these were: 'negative views of the police'; 'concerns about safety'; 'positive views of the police' a 'desire for peace'; and 'politicised views of the police'.

The percentage of the total 604 submissions relating to crime and policing attributed to each of these concerns is given in figure 5.1 below.

Figure 5.1 Crime and Policing: Main Issues
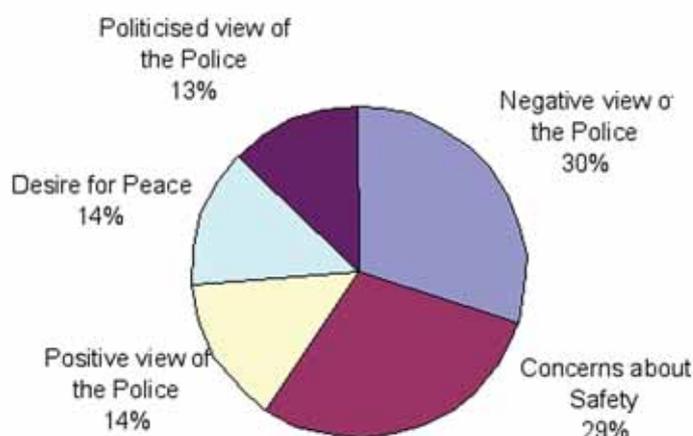
ISSUE 1: NEGATIVE VIEW OF THE POLICE

Of the 604 submissions relating to policing and crime from children and young people, 181 (30%) depicted a negative view of the police. This category was based on the perception that the police 'don't do a good job keeping the peace', they harass young people for no reason, they are 'obsessed' with speeding fines and they show little respect for rural areas through noise and pollution from helicopters landing in fields. Overall, 44% of pupils aged 12-14 years and 30% of pupils aged 15-16 depicted the police in a negative light with more boys than girls choosing to criticise the police as ineffective and incompetent (52% of boys compared to 33% of girls described the police in negative terms). However, although the data suggested that boys in particular, and older teenagers in general seemed to be particularly critical of the police, a more detailed analysis of these submissions suggested that young people had different reasons for disliking the police.

By far the most pressing issue to emerge was the perception that these law enforcers were ineffective and incompetent when solving what many young people termed 'real crime'. The suggestion was that the police preferred to focus on petty crime committed by 'innocent' members of the public as opposed to channelling their time and resources into pursuing 'hardened' criminals. These petty crimes included driving with dirty number plates, having an out-of-date tax disc, parking fines, driving slightly over the speed limit and driving with a broken car taillight. In addition to 'fussing' over petty crimes, the police were further criticised for being 'big headed' and were described as 'kings of the road' in the sense that they could abuse their position of power by setting up road blocks and demanding that drivers disclose personal information such as their name and address and destination of travel, by using their sirens to avoid traffic delays when collecting take away food or when finishing their work shift or by

driving at fast speeds without seat belts whilst prosecuting other members of the public for taking the same actions. The positioning of the police as 'above the law' led many young people to accuse the police of being 'hypocritical' in that they could abuse their position of power. The overarching sentiment was that the police had become obsessed with penalising 'ordinary' members of the public for small scale criminal offences and neglected their broader obligation to uphold law and order by pursuing and prosecuting the most serious law breaking offenders. Typical comments from young people included:

'The police need to be tougher. Presently there was some trouble near my area and the police drove right past. Obviously this was very stupid as someone could have been getting seriously injured and the police couldn't care less. They seem so keen to catch underage drinkers yet they don't look at other aspects of community life! Speeding is also a big issue yet it looks like this doesn't apply to the police. I witnessed a police car doing about 60mph in a 30 mph speed limit. This is near to a school and some small kids could have run onto the road and easily been killed. They need to wise up and get tougher on violence' (Girl aged 14).

'The police are too busy annoying people and asking them where they are coming and heading from rather than making themselves useful by stopping fights outside discos. They are getting paid for doing shit all when the money could be going to more worthwhile causes. They just annoy innocent people. They give fines to people who have a tax disc a day over and dirty number plates while criminals are getting away with murders and shop lifting' (Girl aged 15).

'The cops sometimes get it right by catching the robbers and killers but most of the time they are out to get the public who are not doing any harm such as people who are slightly over the speed limit or people with no tax or in some places they put curfews on all kids even though it may be just a small percentage of the kids who are causing trouble' (Boy aged 14).

'Police do not do enough to help people in trouble but they have all the time in the world to tell people off when they are not doing anything' (Girl aged 15).

In addition to criticising the police for being slow to arrive at the scene of a crime and for being 'obsessed' with prosecuting members of the public for 'innocent' petty crimes, young people were concerned about the potentially volatile relationship between some young people and the police. Teenagers living in working class areas noted that the police harassed young people by ordering them to move away from street corners and accusing them of disorderly behaviour without giving young people the opportunity to explain themselves. Young people accused the police of 'talking down' to them and 'always telling us what to do'. The tendency for teenage boys from both Catholic and Protestant areas to describe the police as 'always watching you' suggests that social class and age are as significant as religion in determining which areas are likely to be more heavily policed. Typical comments from boys living in Catholic and Protestant working class areas included:

'One thing that annoys me in my community is the police because they try and lift you for nothing. They drive into your estate just asking for trouble and if there is none, they give you the fingers and they just slabber at you for nothing' (Boy aged 14).

'The police often blame young people for the crime that goes on in the area. The police say it is the young people, but how would they know?' (Boy aged 14).

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'The police sometimes get involved in young people's social lives. Sometimes they try to move you on from the spot where you are standing even when you are not even causing any trouble. They can be very arrogant to young males because they think they are the cause of most of the trouble' (Boy aged 15).

'Police should mind their own business. They're always harassing us because of our age. Because of our age they think were up to no good. They look down on us as if we are young hoods or troublemakers' (Boy aged 15).

Two factors appeared to have a crucial influence on the relationship teenager boys forged with the police. The first concerned the lack of age appropriate leisure and recreational facilities catering for the needs of young people and keeping them off the streets and out of contact with the police. As one teenager put it:

'In [name of town] there is nothing for the young people to do so that is why they all hang out on the streets and get into trouble with the police' (Girl age 15).

The second concerned the stereotypical image of boys as the most likely troublemakers. Many teenage boys contested this generalisation accusing the police of having a misplaced and prejudiced view of young teenage males. They felt that their age and gender automatically placed them under suspicion, making them the prime scapegoats when trouble occurred in their area. This reaction may explain why so many of the submissions received from teenage boys depicted the police in negative terms. As one young man commented:

'I think that the police are just interested in getting their wage packet at the end of the week. They don't care about the community or the young people. They are letting the joy riders and the drug dealers away with everything but moving us on from the streets and taking our carry outs off us instead of dealing with the other more serious matters. They are so interested in messing our night up while pensioners are being robbed and injured. If the police left us alone then we wouldn't cause trouble. The police provoke us… What I hate most is that I moved house and one of the police men that has moved me on in the past, lives at the end of my cul-de-sac and he knows who I am and stares me out all the time and thinks I'm a wee hood' (Boy aged 15).

Another young person wrote 'Crime starters' on the side of a police land rover, which usually bears the words 'Crime stoppers'.

The final factor that appeared to influence negative perceptions of the police concerned the tendency for army helicopters to land, unannounced and uninvited into family-owned fields. Although army personnel are not directly connected to the police, some children regarded the army as another negative manifestation of state control and law enforcement. Catholic children living in rural areas not only claimed that these helicopters frightened farm animals and destroyed the habitat of local wildlife, but they criticised helicopter landings for flattening and therefore ruining fields of crops. These actions were termed 'disrespectful' and highly damaging to the countryside and to the farming economy.

'The brits are always in our fields and roads. One day a helicopter landed in a field opposite our house and the brits got out and started walking about our land like they don't care and destroying the grass. They called me 'Catholic scum' and a 'fat bastard' (Girl aged 14).

'The police can do anything they want. They are allowed to walk over people's land and one day their helicopter landed on our silage ground which was ready for cutting' (Boy aged 15).

ISSUE 2: CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY

Of the 604 submissions relating to the theme of crime/police 177 (29%) raised the issue of safety in the community. As noted in the previous chapter on play and leisure, many children and young people expressed concern about their safety in play parks frequented by older youths whose drinking binges often led to broken glass becoming embedded in the grass. When children and young people raised issues relating to safety in their area, their concerns were much more wide-ranging. They included joyriding in the area, concerns about the way their movements were restricted because of their religion and concerns about the presence of paramilitaries who policed their communities. Whereas more girls than boys voiced concern about their safety in play parks it was boys who had the greatest number of concerns about their safety in their area with 53% of boys compared to 34% of girls rating 'safety' issues as a key priority. Children and young people living in working class areas were particularly concerned about the risks posed by drug dealers, alcohol pushers and joyriders who lived in the area. Typical comments included:

'My area is stinkin'. It's full of rubbish. The neighbours are either drug dealers or drug takers or joy riders. They're scumbags and they are not very clean to be honest. In my area you won't go one day without seeing a stolen car and being asked do you want to buy any drugs. There is an awful lot of anti-social behaviour and loads of fights. Neighbours fighting over something stupid and being left in hospital. There is graffiti underage smoking/drinking and a lot of burnt out cars. Tell Tony Blair we want more cash now!' (Boy aged 16).

'My area is full of drugs, drug dealers and alcoholics. There is loads of alcoholics. It scares me. Do something please' (Girl aged 16).

'The things in my street that annoy me are that there is nothing to do in the way that there is no youth facilities… I have started to see the crowds gathering about my street. They cause fights and attract hoods and joy riders to my street. They would break glass bottles and leave glue bags and poppers about the street and make it look bad. Joy riders are a bad thing to have about your area but no one stops them and they are up in my street every night. Litter is a big issue in my street, this is a big problem and it keeps growing. Drug dealers in my street stand on street corners and pass drugs to each other and people get high or stoned or even off their face! I think the government should clamp down on everything in this essay that I am reading' (Boy aged 14).

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'The streets should be made safer. It annoys me because you have to be in early on the weekend due to gangs being intoxicated and doing stupid things. So if you make the streets safer then you and your parents will have no worries about anything happening to you or you getting into trouble. It is all over the news that there is more people (young adults) are being attacked (stabbed) due to alcohol. Drugs are being sold at your own street corner. You can't walk anywhere without people doing drugs, abusing aerosols etc. As a kid you would want the best for your kid and that wouldn't be on the agenda' (Boy aged 14).

Criticisms of drug dealers, youths standing on street corners drinking, aerosol abusers, neighbours fighting in streets, and graffiti and rubbish, dominated the submissions from children living in predominantly working class areas. In certain of these areas, joyriding was identified as a popular form of recreational activity. Joyriding, however, not only led to problems with thieving, reckless driving, unsightly speed marks on the roads, burnt out car shells and potholes on roads and pavements, but it also placed local residents, particularly children, in constant danger as they walked through their areas during the night and day. One girl wrote in:

'You are constantly afraid of joy riders in their stolen cars because they are even out and about during the day now. There is also a lot of broken glass around because of all the people who were hanging around at the weekend with their carry outs' (Girl aged 15).

The potentially devastating impact on young children who are exposed to drug and alcohol abuse was a prime concern of many young people not least because they considered that such activities were allowed to persist with little intervention from the police. Typical responses were:

'You always see underage drinkers on the streets but if the peelers (police) are driving along and they see a crime, they just keep on driving. The street aren't safe!' (Boy aged 12)

'I think that the police aren't doing a good job. Where I live, as with many other places, there is a lot of under age drinking. There are certain places you feel you cannot go because of these drunken people. Even along the main road, in the public toilets, you can see young people drinking and the police drive right past them and just ignore them' (Boy aged 15).

Some children and young people suggested that the police 'ignore' reported incidents of underage drinking because some neighbourhoods operate their own forms of 'community policing'. Although the issue of paramilitary activity was raised in submissions from children at only two schools, this should not detract from the seriousness of the issues. It was not that young people were afraid of the paramilitaries who policed their area. Rather their main criticism was that paramilitaries hassled groups of young people by moving them away from their own street corners leaving them with no alternative places to go. Typical comments included:

'In our area there are some men who want to be in the RA and they come round and move you away from where you stand and move you to inappropriate places where you do not want to go. My father told me not to listen to them as they should not be coming to us they should be going to people like joy riders and vandals in the community' (Boy aged 13).

'In [name of area] there is nothing for the kids to do. It is crap and full of graffiti. There is lots of rubbish and stolen cars. The burn marks make the area look stinkin. There can be plenty of fights at the weekend when the kids round my age get drunk. There is community watch and they are a bunch of wankers. They don't let us do anything. We are not even allowed to even stand on the street corner without getting told to move on when we are not drinking or making much noise' (Boy aged 15).

'In my area there are a lot of things that annoy me. Here are some of them. The provies; when you stand there, the provies come along and move you away because they think you are bothering people. Also there are crowds and joy riders who stand about nearly every night drinking and vandalising our area' (Boy aged 14).

Although both boys and girls were moved on from street corners by individuals they termed 'community watch', there was a consensus that boys were more likely than girls to be hassled, and, as suggested in the comments above, this caused resentment among young boys living in such communities. In part, this resentment stemmed from the perception that joyriding had more wide-ranging and destructive implications for the local community than young people who had nothing else to do. As one young person stated, 'I don't see why we always get told to move on by the Ra where there is nowhere for us to go'. How teenage boys are made easy scapegoats for anti-social behaviour when only a minority cause trouble is a significant issue for concern. It has the potential to produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. A 14-year-old girl, for example, suggested:

'In my area there is absolutely nothing to do and this leads to crowds gathering around street corners. As the crowds gather, provies are like the hunters. They abuse, threat, beat and move you to a different place. People ask why do children convict crime on drug dealing, thieving cars, attacks and robberies? Well much of this is caused by the provies as they continue to abuse the children, it gets them [children] very angry and upset leading to crime which they cause'
(Girl aged 14).

Young people moved on from street corners by the local community watch had no alternative space. Even if local leisure or recreational facilities were available in neighbouring areas, there was no guarantee that they would have been able to access the facilities. Segregated social space in Northern Ireland is such that young people wearing Celtic or Rangers football shirts were targets for sectarian attack if they ventured into the 'wrong' area. Young people claimed that they would not be served in shops if they wore the wrong football shirt or they would be vulnerable to being stoned and attacked. School pupils however, did not have to wear a football shirt jersey to realise that their movements into particular areas were restricted.
Typical comments were:

'You are scared to go into some placed like [name of a place] because you would be beat up because of your religion. Parents are scared to let you out because there have been people killed not so long ago in that place' (Girl aged 14).

'I cannot go down to my local park because it is only the other religion. If we go in, there will probably be a fight or we will be thrown out' (Girl aged 14).

'I live in my area because it is mainly Protestant so I can wear a rangers shirt without worrying about getting beat up' (Boy aged 14).

The majority of pupils who raised religion as the main factor, which restricted their movements, were critical of this restriction. They stated:

'We should be allowed to go wherever we want and not be criticised and the religion in the area should be handled and dealt with. There should be no people left out and we should all get along' (Girl aged 14).

'Where I live everything is ok except there are people with a different religion who also live near and people give them a hard life. I wish there was no religion so that everyone could get along and there would be no fighting' (Boy aged 14).

ISSUE 3: POSITIVE VIEW OF THE POLICE

Of the 604 submissions, 14% depicted the police in a positive light. Of these, 57% were made by children aged 5-11 years. A further 19% came from children with special educational needs. The most significant feature of the submissions from these particular groups of children and young people was that their portrayal of the police was markedly influenced by 'cop and robber' films, positioning the cops as 'good' and the criminals as 'bad'. Boys in primary school were especially likely to portray the police in a positive light possibly because these boys are at the age when they are likely to be most interested in action figures and stories based on police chases as featured in popular play station games. In their pictures and stories/posters, it was common for children to draw criminals carrying a swag bag while dressed in a striped black and white shirt. Often these 'male' criminals would have their hands cuffed or tied behind their backs, the suggestion being that a police arrest was successful. Other children drew action pictures of the police engaged in shootouts with criminals. Depictions of criminals included over exaggerated bushy eyebrows, a detail which could have been used to suggest 'evil' eyes. Children's descriptions of these drawings, which were recorded verbatim suggested that if anything 'bad' happened in the community, the police would 'sort' it out. The following drawings and quotes are typical of the submissions presenting a positive view of the police:

'I think the police are nice people because say someone is throwing stones, if you call 999 they will come straight away and sort it out' (Boy aged 9).

'I think the police are good because if somebody was stealing stuff, they would try and find them' (Boy aged 9)

'The police are good fighters, they fight crime, check for drinks and drugs and are on the right side of the law' (Girl aged 10).

ISSUE 4: DESIRE FOR PEACE

The fourth main issue concerned a desire for peace. That 83 out of 604 submissions (14%) expressed a desire for the conflict in Northern Ireland to end is significant in the sense that this reaction was expressed in response to questions, which asked children and young people about unfairness in their lives and images of the police. Seventy four percent of those who expressed a desire for peace were aged 12-16 suggesting that children's desire for peace increases significantly with age. Many of these young people remarked that they wanted Catholics and Protestants 'to get along' and to 'stop fighting with one another'. Irrespective of whether the conflict in Northern Ireland was described as being waged on the grounds of religion or politics, the important point being that a significant number of young people expressed a desire for peace when the researchers prompted them to think about what was unfair about lives.
Typical comments were:

'I hate when different religions fight with each other and I hate when there is bombs and all those things. I would just love if the whole world was all the same religion or even all a different religion with no fighting' (Girl aged 14).

'I do not know why Catholics hate Protestants and Protestants hate Catholics. They both worship the same God. This is from a stupid feud from the time of Martin Luther' (Boy aged 13).

ISSUE 5: POLITICISED VIEWS OF THE POLICE

The fifth main issue relates to the 'politicised' views of the police expressed in 77 of the 604 submissions (13%). The term 'politicised' has a broad application including the perception that the police treat Catholics and Protestants differently, claims that new Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) is no different from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and negative images associating the police with riots. Data analysis suggested that young people aged 14-16 were among the most likely to express politicised views of the police (42% of all submissions came from this group of young people) with significantly more boys than girls describing the police as politicised (65% of boys compared to 35% of girls).

The main concern expressed in submissions categorized as 'politicised views of the police' was the perception that police in Northern Ireland treat Catholics and Protestants differently. Whilst a small number of pupils from predominantly Protestant schools claimed that the police 'side with Catholics' and over-police Protestant housing estates, the bulk of the comments suggested that the police treat Catholics much more harshly than Protestants. In their submissions, Catholic boys and girls claimed that wearing a Celtic shirt made them easy likely targets for police harassment. This was especially the case in fringe Catholic areas, which were perceived as over-policed. Catholic children and young people living in these areas described how occasionally the police pointed guns at local residents as if pretending to practise their aim. It was alleged that the police shone the lights of land rovers into the houses of residents or at individuals walking along the street as a form of harassment and intimidation. Recounting personal experiences young people remarked:

'When we are having a parade there is about 4 police men when it is a Catholic thing there is about 30 or 40. I hate it. Is it any wonder we hate the police?' (Girl aged 13).

'I think the police are total and absolute assholes. I hate them with a passion. I think that because I come from a real republican family and in my family the police have done a lot. They fined my father for hitting someone who hit him, they put my uncle in jail for no reason and they took my dada's driving licence away for stealing a fishing rod. I hate them and not because they are Prods, but because I have reasons' (Girl aged 14).

'The police have a very bad reputation in the place where I live. I think that we should get a new police service so people won't feel threatened or angry by the PSNI. They intrude in our streets even if there isn't any trouble. I had a light shone on me walking to the local shop. I wasn't causing any trouble so I couldn't help feeling it was done to annoy me but there was nothing I could do to defend myself without being anti-social' (Girl aged 15).

'I feel very strongly about the way the police treat people. They abuse and destroy the lives of Catholics and their families all over Northern Ireland. They are fuckers; the lot of them, taking sides when there is fighting on. They are all over the roads, hiding in bushes and flying helicopters all over the area I live in. They destroy the happiness all round my home' (Girl aged 14).

Catholic children living in rural areas also expressed scepticism about the impartiality of the police:

'I feel that most of the police force are Prods and when a Catholic and Prod are in a fight or something, it will always be the Catholic that gets lifted and the Prod let free. My granny lives on a farm with loads of fields but the police just tramp over them and trample down the barbwire without even asking because they're the police' (Girl aged 14).

'I feel very strongly about the way the police treat people. They abuse and destroy the lives of Catholics and their families all over Northern Ireland. They are fuckers the lot of them, taking sides when there is fighting on. They are all over the roads, hiding in bushes and flying helicopters all over the area I live in. they destroy the happiness all round my home' (girl aged 14).

The distrust embedded in phases such as 'I hate the police' the police are 'assholes' who 'intrude in our streets' suggests that a considerable amount of work needs to de done towards changing perceptions of the police. While the evidence was not clear whether or not children and young people who associated the police with rioting were depicting a positive or negative view of the police, the fact that this image emerged repeatedly and consistently in the data illustrates the difficulties faced by the police winning confidence in Northern Ireland's communities. This is particularly pertinent given that the data shows that some young people clearly did not like the police yet were unable to explain why they held this opinion.

'We are not really told anything about the police as they don't come round her often. But I am aware that we cannot rely on them at all or even want to be a policeman as an occupation. The garda are the only police you can trust. The police in Northern Ireland don't give a shit about Catholics. My sisters and brothers have gotten cars stolen up in Belfast in the past and the police do nothing hardly to help' (Girl aged 15).

'The police to me isn't a personal issue as I have little experience with them but I do realise that the police in Northern Ireland don't give a dam about the well beings of Catholic citizens. I am well aware of what goes on. I know that them protecting the area isn't for safety reasons but to reinforce that we are under British rule'.

Amid these comments there was a sense of optimism that things might change if more Catholics joined the PSNI. Indeed this was the main suggestion forwarded for improving relations between the police and local residents living in Catholic areas. The suggestion was that the police would not be 'as harsh' towards Catholics if more Catholics joined the force.

CONCLUSION

Children have a strong sense of what is fair and unfair, a strong sense of injustice. According to Dickens, there is nothing that is "so finely perceived and so finely felt" in the world in which children live. This research indicates that this sense of injustice is most strongly felt with respect to the failure on the part of adults to treat children and young people with respect, particularly to listen to their views and to give them due weight. The importance of this point is underscored by the emphasis children and young people placed on their lack of voice in the everyday decisions which take place in their schools, their homes, in play space and in their local area/community. In fact across all of the themes, by far the most popular issue raised was having 'no say' in decisions that affect many aspects of their lives. This clearly contravenes Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which requires States Parties to: "assure to the child who is capable of forming his own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child to be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child". As one young girl wrote at the end of her story about the problems in her community:

"… I know we're just kids but we live in this world, too. And [if] we don't say anything about it who will" *(Girl, aged 10).*

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Table 1: Structure Of Schools Sample By Method Of Data Collection

Gender (%)	Story	Picture	Poster	Dusty Bin	Discussion	Total
Male	206	88	208	8	-	510 (48%)
Female	182	66	136	2	-	386 (36%)
Mixed group**	-		152	-	16	168 (16%)
School Type						
Controlled P.S	57	84	108	-	-	249 (23%)
Controlled S.S	81	-	28	-	-	109 (10%)
Controlled G.S	41	-	52	-	-	93 (9%)
Maintained P.S	86	50	132	-	-	268 (25%)
Maintained S.S	98	-	76	-	-	174 (16%)
Maintained/ Vol. G.S	-	-	24	-	-	24 (2%)
Integrated P.S	25	-	24	-	-	49 (5%)
MLD	-	20	52	-	-	72 (7%)
SLD	-	-	-	10	16	26 (2%)
Religion						
Catholic	184	50	232	-	-	466 (44%)
Predominantly Protestant	179	104	240	10	16	549 (52%)
Integrated	25	-	24	-	-	49 (5%)
Board						
NEELB	28	53	184	10	16	291 (27%)
BELB	85	15	128	-	-	228 (21%)
WELB	101	27	100	-	-	228 (21%)
SELB	44	20	24	-	-	88 (8%)
SEELB	130	39	60	-	-	229 (22%)
Key Stage						
1	39	132	60	-	-	231 (22%)
2	139	2	204	-	-	345 (32%)
3	143	20	72	5	-	240 (23%)
4	67	-	160	5	-	232 (22%)
17+***	-	-	-	-	16	16 (2%)
Total	**388**	**154**	**496**	**10**	**16**	**1064**

Guidance Notes For Table 1

*   N=1064 people.
**   Posters and discussion groups were made up of both males and females with an average of four persons per poster group and eight persons per discussion group. As not all pupils would volunteer their name (or choose a pseudonym), it was not possible to provide a gender breakdown of all groups.
***   The 17+ age category represents those with Severe Learning Disabilities. Due to the timing of data collection (i.e. exam time), schools understandably did not give access to this age group in mainstream schools.

NI COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMISSIONED RESEARCH

Dear Parent/Guardian,

We are a team of researchers carrying out a project on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People. The aim of the research is to help the Commissioner establish the priorities for his office. In order to do this we are collecting information from children in relation to their rights and what is it like for them growing up and living in Northern Ireland. Some children's views may be included in reports and articles about the research but no names will be used and any quotations will be anonymous.

We would like as many children as possible to be included in the study and hope very much that your son or daughter will be able to participate. We will be visiting your child's school in due course. If you **do not** want your son or daughter to take part please complete the following reply slip and return it to the school.

If you **do allow** your child to take part, you don't have to return the reply slip.

I DO NOT WANT my son/daughter to take part in this research

Child's Name: _____
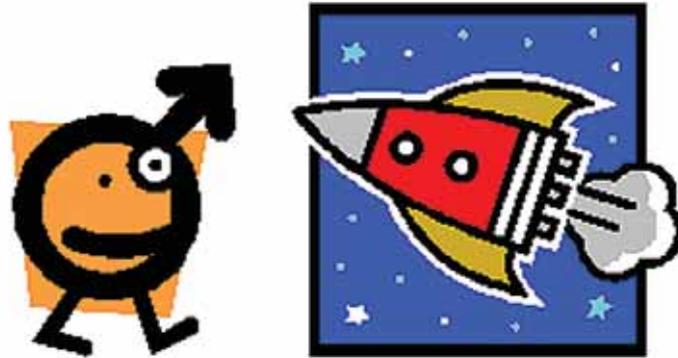
Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

NICCY
northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

POSTER TASK - MLD
(Printed in colour coded card)

Congratulations!
Your group has been picked to design a poster
letting everyone know what types of things
young people like you might think are
unfair about school or do not like about school.

An alien has landed in your school. He has never been to the planet earth before and does not know what the words 'crime' and 'police' mean.

Your group has been picked to design a poster which shows him all the things you think of when you hear the words 'crime' and 'the police'. These can be good things or bad things.

The **adults in your area are trying to find out** about all of the things that young people like you **do not like** about where you live.

Design a poster showing all of the things that you **do not like** about where you live. **They have** asked you to think about things which **might** **annoy you** and that you **would like to change.**

NICCY
northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

Congratulations! Your group has been given a big pile of money to spend on making play/ leisure facilities better for young people like you.

First of all, fold your poster in half and open it out again, so as there is a line down the middle.

On one side of the poster draw all of the things that you do not like about the play/leisure facilities you use.

On the other side of the poster, draw pictures of things that you would spend the money on to make play/leisure facilities better for young people like you.

Your local newspaper is writing an article and they need your help. They want to know about the types of things that happen in the home that young people think are unfair.

They have asked you to find out about all of the things that young people like you would like more of a say in at home. For example, is there something that you think you should be asked about more than you are now?

Use the poster provided to design your newspaper article.

DUSTY BIN TASK: SLD (Aged 8-14 years)

(Please note that the option cards for each theme will have to be scanned and inserted seperately as they used a different computer package)

Dusty bin is hungry today. He likes to eat pictures. Feed dusty bin all of the pictures of things you don't like about school.

(A similar picture was presented for each theme)

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