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#Pupil Voice *Making A Difference*

**A Youth Led Study into Pupil Participation
in Northern Ireland**

Forewords



As the Commissioner for Children and Young People in NI it is my responsibility to promote and safeguard the rights of all the children. In view of the fact that (school-aged) children and young people spend approximately a fifth of their week at school, being educated then, it is inevitable that education will be a significant focus of the work of NICCY.

One of the key components of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is Article 12 which states:

“the child has the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child”¹

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has continually expressed its concern with regards to the lack of progress to fully implement children and young people’s full participation across our education system. The Committee’s 2008 report stated that government should ‘strengthen children’s participation in all matters of school, classroom and learning which affect them’.

Therefore, NICCY is delighted to have worked in partnership with the NIYF, to undertake this study and welcomes the findings. I fully accept the recommendations relating to NICCY specifically, but will also be working with the Department of Education (DE) and all relevant education bodies, to ensure the necessary improvements are made. That includes the full implementation of DE’s Circular, as well as the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) fulfilling their role, to ensure appropriate monitoring and reporting.

Meaningful and inclusive engagement and participation of children and young people, of all ages and abilities, in their education will not only improve outcomes for children but for the whole school community. School councils are one such mechanism but I look forward to hearing how our education system is incorporating the views and experiences of its pupils in processes that affect them and their school environment. Ultimately, NICCY wants to see a specific pupil participation policy to support this engagement. Children and young people are, after all, the most important “stakeholder” in our education system.

Koulla Yiasouma

Commissioner



Whilst strides have been made over recent decades in terms of promoting the voices of young people there have also been significant contradictions. Often the rhetoric does not reflect the reality and whilst there appears to be a political will, there are also glaring omissions in our 'participation landscape' locally.

For example, NI is still the only jurisdiction in the UK and Ireland without a regional youth assembly; and despite calls from the UN committee on children and young people, we have no policy which would make pupil participation mandatory.

DE published a circular on pupil participation in 2014 which was designed to encourage pupil participation in decision making. The findings of this report have shown that a circular is clearly not enough and we are calling for a policy to be put in place that enshrines young people's voices in every aspect of school life.

Young people routinely demonstrate their desire to be involved in the policy making process. Education is highlighted extremely frequently as being very important to them.

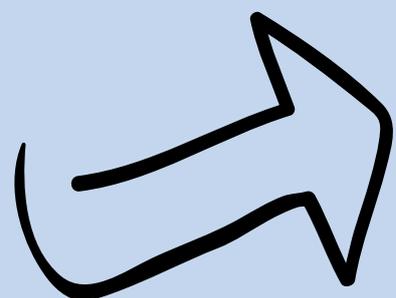
The Northern Ireland Youth Forum firmly believe that there should be a policy in place to enhance pupil participation. One, which ensures that young people's participation, is meaningful; enjoyable and recognised. We believe that this voice should be included at every level of school life including Board of Governors; inspectorate; and curriculum design.

The Minister and his department have spoken about enhanced opportunities for young people's participation, which should be welcomed. However, within the Department's 'Priorities for Youth' policy, commentators have noted that arguably youth participation in decision-making has been diluted.

DE have outlined their intentions to establish a 'Network for Youth'. A Network, which will build upon what is already in place and one would hope, connect pockets of good practice. It is therefore imperative that pupil participation is a key component of this initiative.

We hope that this study can be used as evidence demonstrating the need to strengthen the voices of young people in the decision making process.

Chris Quinn
Director, NIYF



Executive Summary

The Study into Pupil Participation in Northern Ireland was carried out by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF), in partnership with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY).

The study was led by a steering group of young people – members of the NIYF Executive and NICCY's Youth Panel - and involved interviews with teachers (11 in total), focus groups with school councils/other pupil participation structures (110 pupils in total) and the completion of questionnaires by pupils who were not in school councils (172 completed). Twelve schools in total participated in the study, including primary, secondary, grammar and special education schools.

A 'Pupil Participation Have Your Say Day' at which the initial findings were launched and workshops for pupils and teachers were held also formed part of the study. Findings from the interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and Have Your Say Day and the subsequent recommendations, are detailed in this report. This provided an opportunity to celebrate best practice and share learning, which was a key objective of the study.

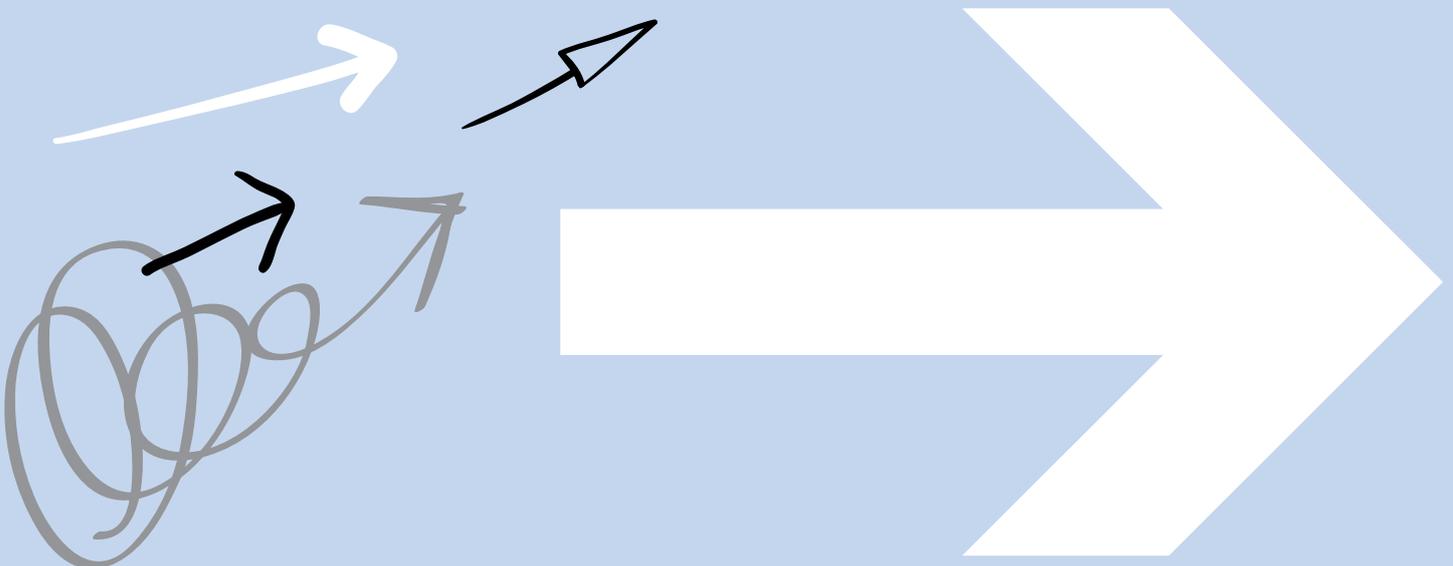


Whilst there are a wealth of definitions and models relating to ‘participation,’ in the context of social sciences, it is largely agreed that ‘participation’ is concerned with participants (whether in society, a programme or an institution) being actively involved in decision-making, influencing, leading and having/sharing power. As such, ‘pupil participation’ relates to children and young people having a say on issues of importance that affect them within education.

The concept of pupil participation is premised mainly on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This is also the basis for the 2014 Department of Education’s (DE) Pupil Participation Circular; ‘Article 12... enshrines the right of all children and young people to say what they think should happen and to have their opinions taken into account, when adults are making decisions that affect them.’² Given that pupils spend approximately 20% of their week engaging in formal education, it is imperative that a culture of pupil participation and participative structures exist within schools.

The overall objectives of the study were defined as follows;

- To ascertain pupils awareness of participation mechanisms in their school;
- To explore what impact pupil participation has on school life and changes that have taken place within the school as a result of it;
- To celebrate best practice and share learning; and
- To explore the use and knowledge of supporting materials for pupil participation such as NICCY’s Democra School Resource



2 Department of Education Northern Ireland (2014) ‘Pupil Participation Circular 2014/14’



Below is a summary of some of the key findings from the study:

- School councils tend to be the most common (and often only) method of pupil participation within schools, with 59% of pupils who participated in the study stating that their school had no other method of participation.
- Encouragingly, the majority of young people who completed questionnaires, as part of the study, were aware of who was on their school council (83.8%) and knew how to get on to the school council (71.1%). However, only two thirds (66.9%) were aware of how they could raise an issue with the school council and less than half (45.7%) were aware of the difference their school council has made within their school.
**Further findings in relation to pupil awareness of participation mechanisms within their school can be found on Pages 16*
- Having a school that is democratic and representative is an important concept for pupils and it is seen as an advantage to have an elected school council.
- Personal and skills development for pupils involved in school councils was seen as one of the main impacts of having a school council. The evidence points to improvements in self-confidence for students who take part in school councils.
- School councils encourage participation and civic engagement beyond school. Young people who took part in school councils were more likely to go on to engage within their community and wider society including taking an interest in politics and civic leadership.

- Changes within schools as a result of pupil participation included an improved relationship/ more open dialogue between staff and pupils, issues being raised that teachers wouldn't have otherwise considered, fundraising activities carried out, a greater sense of ownership of the school being fostered among pupils and practical improvements such as getting new toilets or picnic benches, improving the canteen menu and introducing senior formals.
- There is a need for more training and support for teachers, principals and Boards of Governors in order to ensure that school councils can be effective and that a culture of participation exists within schools.
**Further findings in relation to the impact on and the changes created within school life as a result of pupil participation can be found on Pages 21*
- In relation to pupil participation support materials, including NICCY's Democra School pack, the knowledge of such resources was extremely limited among both young people and teachers, with only 18.6% of pupils and 20% of teachers who participated in the study having heard of it.
- Feedback from both pupils and teachers was largely very positive in relation to Democra School, citing it as being a useful resource to have. Some suggestions for improvement were made, including creating a young person's version, updating the policies referred to within, including case studies/templates/samples, creating separate primary and post primary versions and updating it visually.
**Further findings in relation to Democra School can be found on Pages 28*

Below is a summary of the key recommendations arising from the study:

For the Department of Education NI

- Department of Education to review and strengthen the circular, engaging with pupils at all stages of the review.
- Department of Education to liaise with the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) with a view to including pupil participation as part of the formal inspection process (including self-evaluation) within schools.
- To provide more opportunities for support (including finance and time), training and networking for teachers in the area of pupil participation.
- To promote the Circular and pupil participation support materials to all schools.

For NICCY

- To update and promote the Democra School Guidance.
- To monitor the Department of Education's work on pupil participation and encourage the implementation of the recommendations from this study.

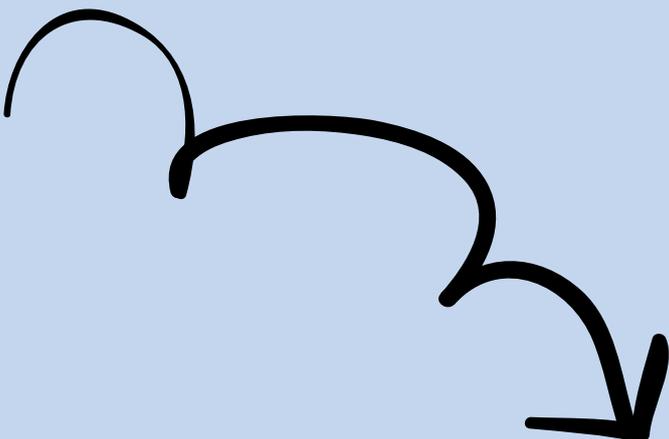
For Schools

- To provide more opportunities for training in pupil participation for governors and all teachers.
- Ensure that pupils have a say in developing policies, teaching practice, curriculum and school rules.
- Work to establish direct links between school councils, senior management and Boards of Governors.
- School council should be timetabled and UNCRC/rights education should be integrated into the curriculum.
- More opportunities for training and networking should be provided for school council members.
- All schools to establish a school council and ensure that other mechanisms exist so that all pupils have the opportunity to have a say on issues that affect them.

For the Department of Employment and Learning

- Pupil participation and its links to the UNCRC should form a specific part of teacher training.

Further detail on the study, the findings and recommendations arising from these can be found within the body of the 'Pupil Participation in Northern Ireland' study report.





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Knockbreda High School is soon amalgamating with Newtownbreda High School to form Breda Academy. As part of this process, the school councils from both schools came together to consult with their wider schools and design the new name, uniform, logo, motto and rewards/sanctions for Breda Academy.

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Acknowledgements

The Pupil Participation Study was informed and led throughout by a steering group consisting of members of the NICCY Youth Panel and NIYF Executive Committee. We would like to thank all the members of the steering group, who dedicated their time, energy and enthusiasm to the Study.

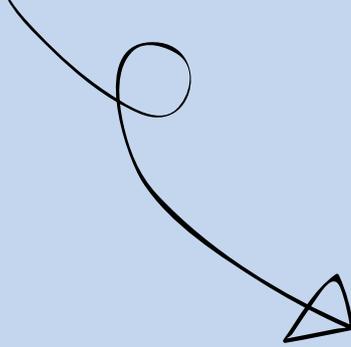
NICCY and NIYF would like to thank the pupils, teachers and senior management of all the schools who expressed an interest in and engaged in the Pupil Participation study, namely;

- **St. Mary's High School**, Newry
- **Glastry College**, Newtownards
- **Slemish College**, Ballymena
- **Ballymoney High School**, Ballymoney
- **Gaelscoil Éanna**, Newtownabbey
- **Assumption Grammar School**, Ballynahinch
- **Oakgrove Integrated College**, Derry/Londonderry
- **St Eugene's College**, Rosslea
- **Knockbreda High School**, Belfast
- **St. Mary's High School**, Limavady
- **Castle Tower School**, Ballymena
- **St. Mark's Primary School**, Belfast

As part of the study, we ran a 'Pupil Participation Have Your Say Day' at the Stormont Hotel in Belfast at which we launched the initial findings and ran workshops for teachers and pupils. We would also like to thank all those who attended the Pupil Participation Have Your Say Day.



Background



This study was carried out by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum in partnership with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). The study involved 12 school councils from both primary and post-primary schools.

The study was youth led by a steering group of 6 young people from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum Executive Committee and NICCY's Youth Panel. This group has led on the design, delivery and recommendations for this report.

The overall objectives were defined as follows:

- To ascertain pupils awareness of participation mechanisms in their school;
- To explore what impact pupil participation has on school life and changes that have taken place within the school as a result of it;
- To celebrate best practice and share learning;
- To explore the use and knowledge of supporting materials for pupil participation such as NICCY's Democra School Resource.

The Northern Ireland Youth Forum carried out the study with 12 schools from the following categories:

- 1 Catholic Maintained Primary School
- 1 Irish Medium Primary School
- 3 Post Primary Controlled Schools
- 3 Post Primary Catholic Maintained Secondary Schools
- 1 Post Primary Catholic Grammar School
- 2 Post Primary Integrated Schools
- 1 Post Primary Special Education School



All schools who took part had functioning school councils. Within each of the 12 schools a focus group was carried out with members of the school council involving 110 pupils in total. A one-to-one interview took place with the lead teacher for the school council (11 teachers in total) and 50 Questionnaires were distributed to pupils who were not in pupil participation structures within 8 of the post primary schools – 172 of which were completed.

Following the initial consultation, a ‘Have Your Say Day’ was facilitated on the 26th March, at the Stormont Hotel, Belfast, attended by 60 pupils, from 6 schools along with a total of 10 teaching staff. Bilateral workshops for both pupils and teachers were facilitated with additional findings from the day being included in this report.

Within Northern Ireland, full-time education is compulsory for 4-16 year olds and time spent at educational institutions, such as schools, accounts for roughly 20% of a child’s week. Therefore, it is vital that educational settings are rights respecting environments and the pupil should be encouraged and enabled to fully express their views and to have those views taken seriously and given due weight. However, the Committee for the Rights of the Child has expressed concern in its ‘Concluding Observations to the UK’ in 2002 and 2008 by stating, “school children are not systematically consulted in matters that affect them.”^{3 4}

Whilst there are a wealth of definitions and models relating to ‘participation,’ in the context of social sciences, it is largely agreed that ‘participation’ is concerned with participants (whether in society, a programme or an institution) being actively involved in decision-making, influencing, leading and having/sharing power; it is about people having a say on issues of importance to, or that affect them. As such, ‘pupil participation’ relates to children and young people having a say on issues of importance to them, or that affect them within their education.

In Northern Ireland there is no legislative or policy requirement for schools to develop participative structures such as school councils. Despite this, there is a requirement in policy to consult with pupils. The exceptions are in the case of discipline and bullying policies when schools are required by law to involve pupils in the design of these.⁵ In 2014, the Department of Education (DE) in Northern Ireland developed a circular to encourage Pupil Participation including the development of school councils.⁶

The concept of pupil participation originated mainly from Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This is also the basis for DE’s Pupil Participation Circular; ‘Article 12... enshrines the right of all children and young people to say what they think should happen and to have their opinions taken into account when adults are making decisions that affect them.’⁷

3 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2002) Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. UN/CRC/C/15/Add.188 (Geneva, United Nations).

4 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2008) Concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. CRC/C/GBR/CO/4, Geneva, United Nations).

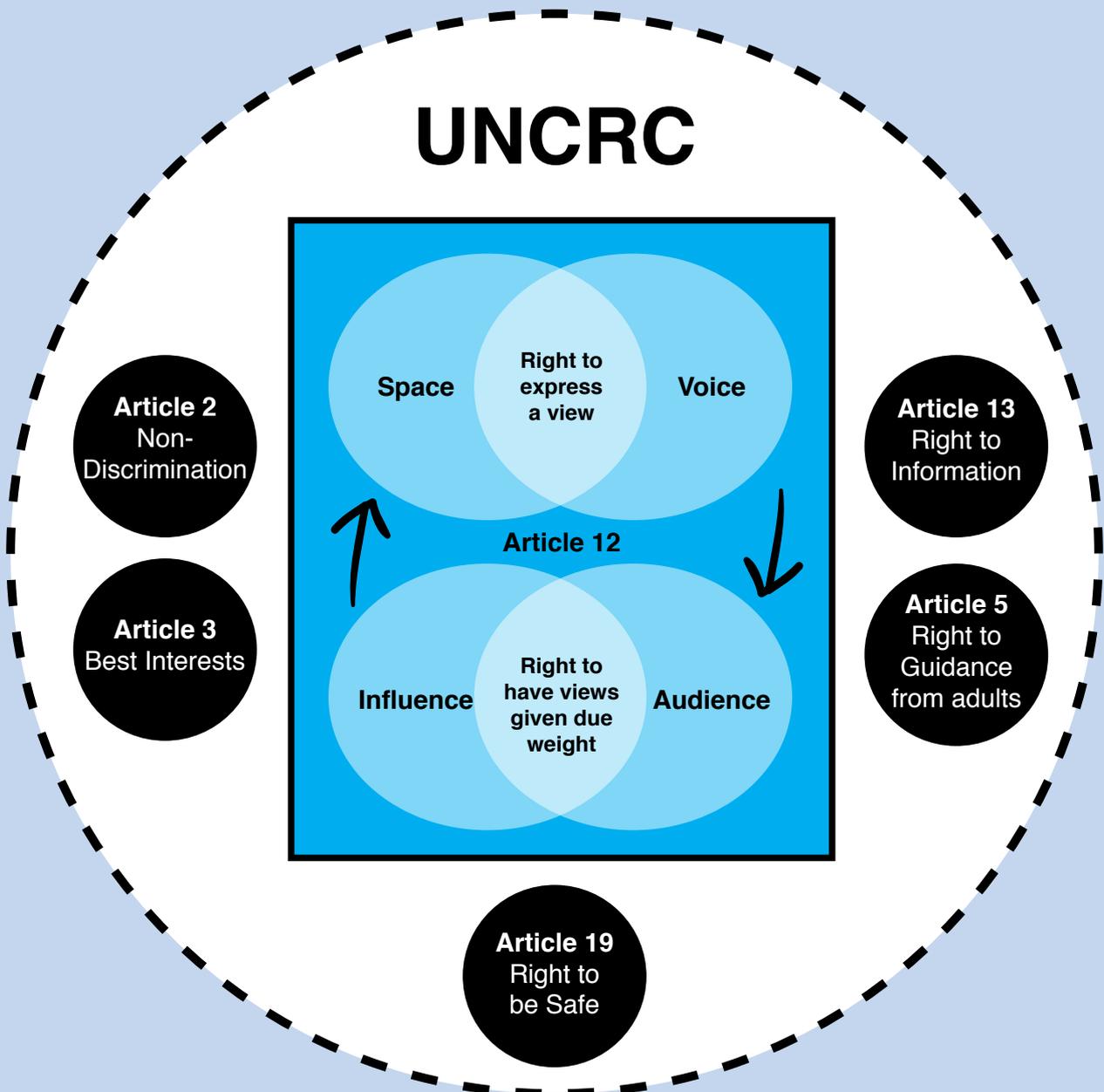
5 Department of Education (2006). The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 No. 1915 (N.I. 11)

6 Department of Education Northern Ireland (2014) ‘Pupil Participation Circular 2014/14’

7 Department of Education Northern Ireland (2014) ‘Pupil Participation Circular 2014/14; Pg. 1’

In the education setting, ‘respect for the child to be heard... is fundamental to the realisation of the right to education.’⁸ The development of the DE Circular on Pupil Participation in 2014 aims to ‘encourage and support schools to have effective forms of engagement to help children and young people to participate in making decisions that affect them’ (p. 1). It goes on to state ‘the Department is committed therefore to encourage all schools to find meaningful ways of giving children and young people a voice, listening to them, respecting and responding to their views and by doing so enabling children and young people to understand that their opinions count’ (p1).

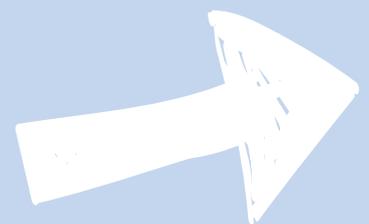
Lundy 2007 suggests that ‘... there is a need for a new means of communicating the legal and human rights imperative in Article 12 of the UNCRC.’ (p932). She proposes that ‘...the successful implementation of Article 12 requires consideration of the implications of four separate factors: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence’ (p932). Lundy’s model is shown below Fig1.





Lundy's model highlights that other Articles from the UNCRC are important to the issue of young people's participation. Lundy states that "Article 12 can only be understood fully when it is considered in the light of other relevant UNCRC provisions; in particular: Article 2 (non-discrimination); Article 3 (best interests); Article 5 (right to guidance); Article 13 (right to seek, receive and impart information); and Article 19 (protection from abuse)."⁹

Although it does not make pupil participation compulsory, the DE Circular 2014/14;¹⁰ is a step forward and provides guidance on the types of pupil participation and some guidance on the establishment of school councils. In addition, the Circular recognises some of the key principles of the UN Convention, such as non-discrimination and support needed for children to express views.



9 Lundy, L (2007) 'Voice is Not Enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' British Educational Research Journal, Vol. 33, No. 6 (Dec. 2007); p933

10 Department of Education Northern Ireland (2014) 'Pupil Participation Circular 2014/14'



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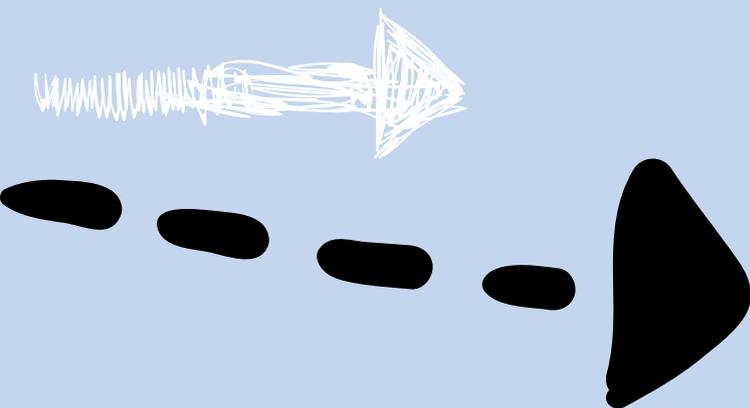
St. Mary's High School, Limavady run mock elections for their school council. Pupils stand on a manifesto and give a speech on why they want to be on the school council. Election posters are put up around the school and 'Election Day' takes place each October, when pupils must bring ID in order to cast their votes. Polling booths are used to give pupils a more realistic experience. This is done with the aim of furthering understanding of democracy and encouraging civic and political participation in adult life.

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Policy Context

There are a number of education policies within Northern Ireland that relate to and support the concept of pupil participation, some of which have been highlighted in the table below. Further relevant policies/conventions/legislation can be found in Appendix 1.

Convention / Policy / Legislation	How school councils align
Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	States that when adults are making decisions that affect children, children have a right to say what they think and have their views taken into account
Revised curriculum (DENI)	Young people should be provided with opportunities to investigate democracy and participate in school and society
Every School A Good School (DENI)	States that it supports school councils and encourages all schools to set up councils or other forums to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions on the running of the school. Young people to be involved in the development of School Development plans
Pupil Participation Circular	Aims to 'encourage and support ...schools to have effective forms of engagement to help children and young people to participate in making decisions that affect them'



Key findings from the Study

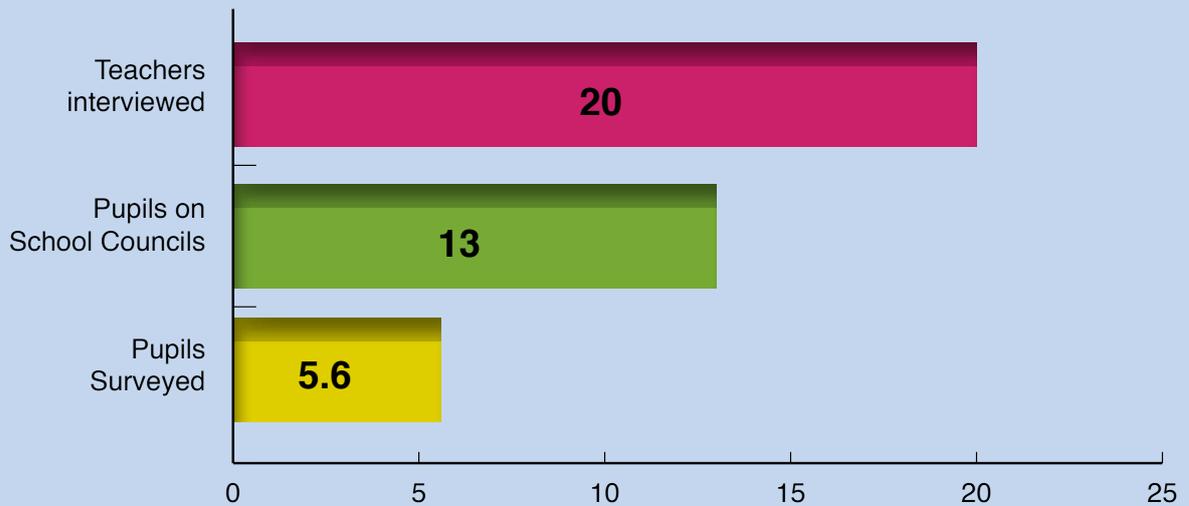
- Awareness of the Pupil Participation Circular (2014) is not high among teachers or pupils, with only 20% of teachers and 9% of pupils involved in the study having heard of it. This was not surprising as the Circular's target audience did not include pupils or teachers but stated that the main 'audiences' are:
 - Principals and Boards of Governors
 - Education and Library Boards
 - The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
 - Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
 - Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
 - Governing Bodies Association



Knockbreda Slemish Integrated College's School Council have been working on developing and consulting with other pupils in relation to a 'Charter for Learning.' This will include the expectations of both teachers and pupils within the school to allow for an enjoyable, productive learning environment.

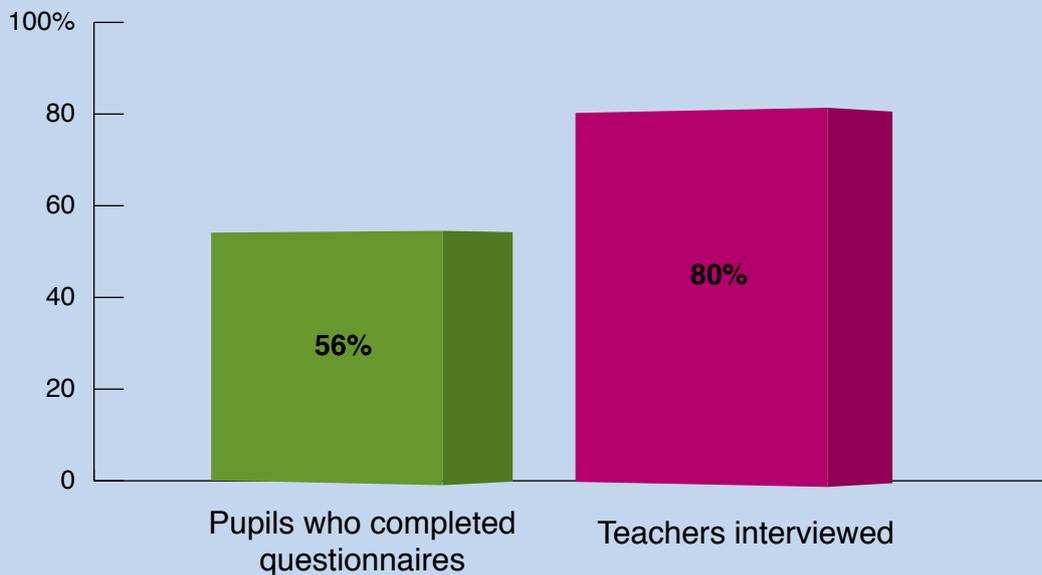
- Within the schools involved in the study, dissemination of the Circular and its content is poor below these very senior levels, including among teachers delivering participative structures such as school councils.
- Only 5.6% of pupils surveyed, 13% of pupils who are on school councils and 20% of teachers interviewed were aware of support materials for school councils such as NICCY's Democra School (Ref. Table 1).

Table 1: Awareness of Pupil Participation Support Materials (%)



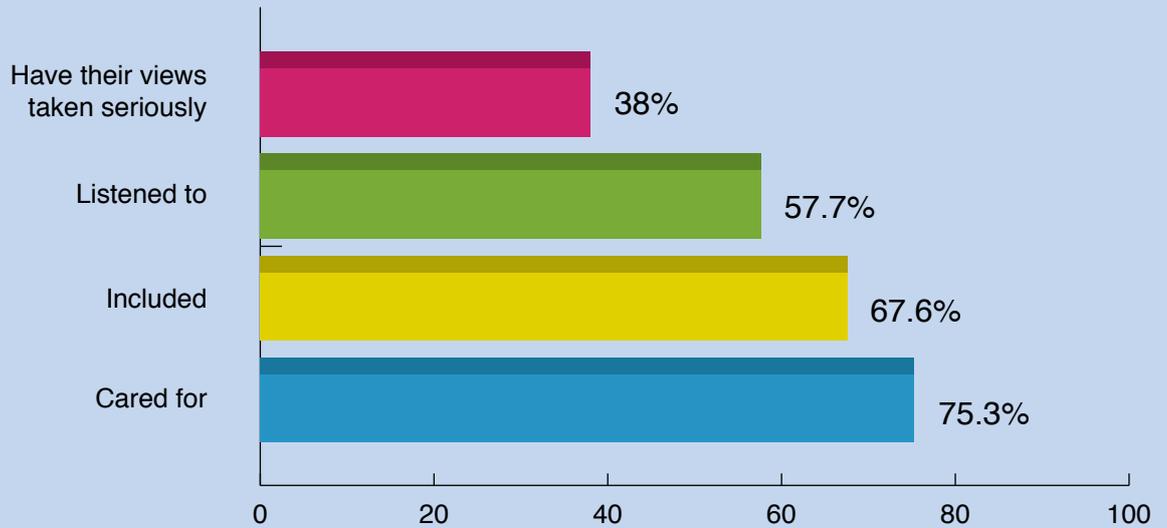
- The United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child is known to 80% of the teachers interviewed and 56% of pupils surveyed (Ref. Table 2) This is an encouraging sign but more work needs to be done to ensure that the rights of the child and the responsibilities of duty bearers are understood to its full extent.

Table 2: Awareness of UNCRC



- 75.3% of pupils surveyed felt cared for, 67.6% felt included and 57.7% felt listened to. However, only 38% felt that their views were taken seriously. Therefore, while schools are viewed as a safe, caring place where pupils feel listened to, 62% do not feel that their views are valued or taken into account (Ref. Table 3).

Table 3 - Pupils' view of their School

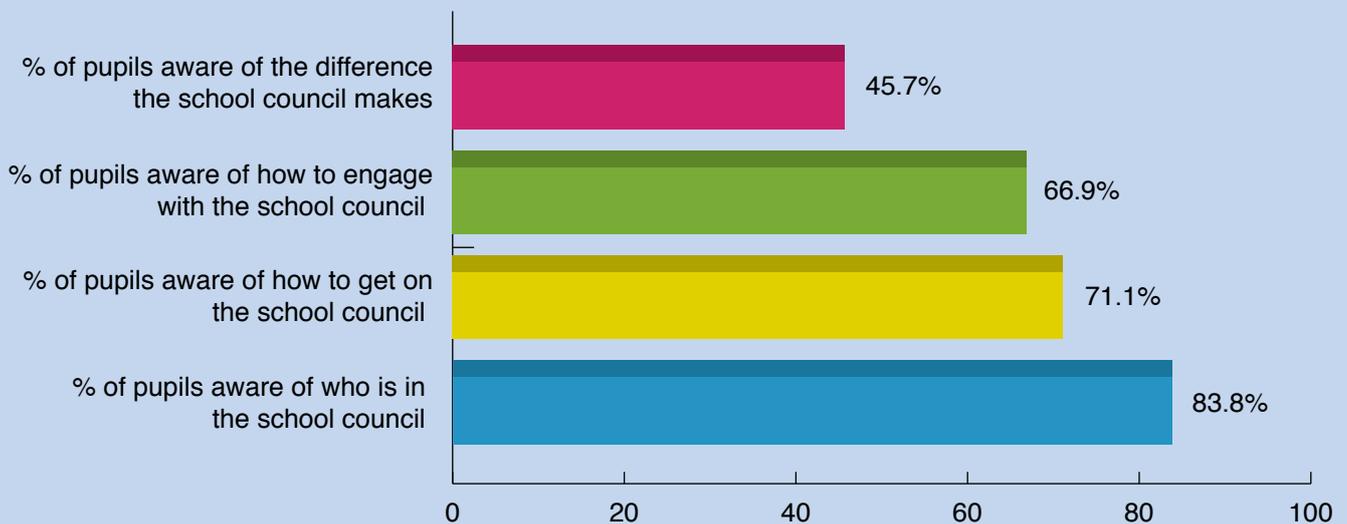


- Pupils felt that school councils were open to discussing any issues that they raised. However, it was also highlighted that the issues being discussed were not always the most relevant to them.



- Outside of school council structures, there are limited ways in which pupils can participate or have their views heard. Some schools had mechanisms such as suggestion boxes open to all pupils and others had newsletters to keep pupils informed, however, 59% of pupils stated that their school had no participation mechanisms other than the school council.
- 83.8 % of pupils surveyed through questionnaires were aware of who is on their school council, 71.1% were aware of how to get on it and 66.9% were aware of how to approach the school council with an issue. However, only 45.7% were aware of the difference it makes within their school (Ref. Table 4).

Table 4 - Other Pupils' Knowledge of School Councils



- Furthermore, through the interviews with teachers, a recurring theme was that whilst other teachers within the schools would know that a school council exists, in many cases, they would not necessarily know how the school council works, what it has been working on or the difference it has made.
- It was encouraging that most school councils felt that there was a link to principals, and occasionally Board of Governors; some even meet regularly with these senior decision makers. However, more could be done to strengthen these links to ensure the direct voice of young people is heard at these levels. Within the DE Circular (2014) there is a recommendation that school councils are linked to Senior Management and have a link to the Board of Governors to ensure the council is effective.

Findings - Benefits of a school council

A key area explored during the study was the perceived benefits of having a school council for pupils, teachers and the school as a whole. The most commonly highlighted benefits were as follows:

- Having a school that is democratic and representative is an important concept for pupils and it is seen as an advantage to have an elected school council.
- Pupils feel that they are listened to and have an opportunity to express their views.
- Many of the school councils organised activities and events such as fundraisers, which benefitted the whole school and this was seen as an advantage of having a school council.
- That the school is improved and positive changes take place as a result of the work of the school council. For example, pupils having a say in school action plans, relationships between teachers and pupils and improved changes to the lunch menu in the school canteen.
- Having a school council allows for more open and informal dialogue with teachers within the schools.
- A benefit of school councils was that any pupil within the school could put themselves forward to be a member, which meant that the opportunity to be on the school council was open to all.
- School councils brought issues to the attention of teachers that they otherwise would not have been aware of.
- School councils develop a sense of ownership within the school. This is highlighted by NICCY who advocate for a more consensual approach, whereby everyone within the school community agrees that a council is important, and values and supports its establishment. The Democra School literature states that there needs to be a sense of ownership from the whole school so that the council can draw support from pupils and staff.
- Personal and skills development for pupils involved in school councils. The evidence points to improvements in self-confidence for students who take part in school councils. This is thought to be a result of getting recognition for good work, seeing suggestions being carried out, having their opinions respected, acting as advocates and having a greater sense of pride or ownership. Collaborative working was also thought to play a role in increasing self-esteem.
- The teacher responsible for the school council in the special school found increased self-confidence among students and improved relationships with staff. This in turn, led to pupils being more likely to ask questions and to take part in event planning, fundraising and engaging with other schools.
- School councils encourage participation and civic engagement beyond school. Young people who took part in school councils were more likely to go on to engage within their community and wider society including taking an interest in politics and civic leadership.

Findings - Barriers to Pupil Participation

Alongside the benefits of having a school council, we also explored the challenges and barriers faced in relation to pupil participation through the interviews with teachers, the questionnaires for pupils, the focus groups with school council members and based on findings at the Have Your Say Day event. Below the key challenges and barriers are identified:

- Lack of support and training for adults. Even when there are genuine opportunities for children and young people to express their views to an audience that are open to hearing them, there is no guarantee that they will be understood. Training of adults working with children and young people is therefore vital; this includes teachers, Principals and Boards of Governors. Children and young people do not always communicate verbally, particularly in the case of young children. It is essential that adults are skilled in active listening and understand how to listen to young people. It is also important that adults are aware of and support children's rights.
- Lack of training for pupils. Members of school councils and pupils in general should be trained in skills such as decision making, representation and communication. It is important that pupils have the skills and confidence as well as the opportunities to ensure effective and full participation.
- School councils and pupil participation needs to be more meaningful and more influential. The DE Pupil Participation Circular (2014) highlights on several occasions that pupils 'have the right to have their voice heard' and that pupils 'need to know they are listened to and their views are valued' that participation gives pupils 'a real say in decisions that affect their lives in school'; and 'communicating to pupils what aspects of their views have (or have not) been acted upon'.¹¹ The UN Committee –in the Report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, warns 'appearing to listen to children is relatively unchallenging, giving due weight requires real change.'¹² Focus needs to be given to the extent of influence pupils have in school decision making.
- Participation models such as Hart's Ladder¹³ highlight these areas of non-participation such as tokenism and decoration. Wierenga's¹⁴ model highlights the interconnected themes of effective participation - meaning, connectedness and control. She emphasises that without control i.e. real and genuine influence on decisions, participation is trivial and tokenistic. Tokenism is a failure in participation and can actually be damaging and negative. Alderson¹⁵ noted that in the case of school councils, tokenism had a more negative impact on pupils than no school council at all.

11 Department of Education Northern Ireland (2014) 'Pupil Participation Circular 2014/14'; p6-8

12 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) 'General Comment No. 5 (2003)' Para. 12

13 Hart, R (1992) 'Children's Participation; From Tokenism to Citizenship' (Florence, International Child Development Centre/UNICEF)

14 Wierenga, A. (2003) 'Sharing a New Story; Young People in Decision Making.' Youth Research Centre, The University of Melbourne

15 Alderson, P. (2000) 'School Students' Views on School Councils and Daily Life at School' Children and Society 14; 121-134

- Include the wider school. Within the Circular16, the Department of Education are keen to support all forms of participation including, but not exclusively, school councils, however, there is only practical guidance provided with regards to school councils. This could result in pupils in schools with an absence of school councils having little access to adults in a position to act on their views, or result in school councils being the only mechanism for pupil participation potentially excluding, therefore, most pupils from having a say.
- Lack of communication. A barrier to effective participation is the lack of feedback/communication around decisions, policies, etc., from decision makers to pupils and school councils. In addition, the study demonstrated that the majority of pupils were unaware of the difference that school councils make so there needs to be greater communication between school councils and the wider school.
- The Circular states ‘no pupil is excluded or prevented from participation due to age, gender, religion, disability, performance or behaviour’, and ‘minority groups and those from areas of greatest disadvantage are represented.’¹⁷ In reality we found that there are less likely to be young people with poor behaviour or attendance on the school council, due to other barriers such as confidence and disengagement from school life in general. These young people need more support and consideration in terms of participation.
- Lack of resources is a significant barrier to the effectiveness of school councils. From the study, a recurring theme was the desire to increase the frequency of meetings. Time pressures due to other school activities, both formal and extracurricular, resulted in difficulties in finding times to suit all members - especially in schools where the school council involved pupils from all year groups.



16 Department of Education Northern Ireland (2014) ‘Pupil Participation Circular 2014/14’

17 Department of Education Northern Ireland (2014) ‘Pupil Participation Circular 2014/14’

Findings - Democra School

One of NICCY's first participation initiatives on a strategic level was the development of work on pupil participation in schools, including through school councils. As a key part of children's lives, is their experience in education, NICCY has worked to develop the ethos and practice of participation throughout school life.

NICCY developed the Democra-School programme and worked with pupils themselves, to develop school councils and other structures for participation in school, to make sure that pupils would have a voice.

The Democra School 'Having Your Say' Guidance was a resource developed in 2007 by NICCY¹⁸ (with involvement from teachers, pupils and key officials at board and departmental level), aimed primarily at teachers to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils and the practice of democracy in the school environment. In undertaking this study, NICCY felt it would be an opportune time to review the resource with the view of updating it, if this was deemed necessary.

It was felt that important aspects to explore with teachers and pupils, in relation to the Guidance and as part of the study, were issues such as current levels of awareness and if, and how, the resource was being used. Also identifying any positive aspects and any areas for improvement and development. As such, pupils (through focus groups with school councils and questionnaires) were asked if they had heard of the Democra School Guidance before, as were teachers.

Approximately 50% of the teachers involved with the study were also given a copy of the Guidance and asked to provide their comments on it during the interviews with them. The teachers also provided feedback on the resource, during the teacher's workshop at the 'Have Your Say Day'. A focus group with 10 young people was also carried out to ascertain their thoughts on the Guidance.

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Gaelscoil Éanna have young people represented on their Board of Governors

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18 NICCY (2007) 'Democra School. Having Your Say; Guidance For School Councils'

Key findings from the study in relation to Democra School 'Having Your Say' Guidance are highlighted below:

- Knowledge of the Guidance was low, with only 5.6% of pupils surveyed, 13% of pupils who are on school councils and 20% of teachers interviewed, being aware of it. Of those young people who participated in the Democra School focus group, none had previously heard of the resource and only two of the teachers interviewed had used the Guidance.
- Although largely unaware of the Democra School Guidance, the majority of teachers (including those interviewed and those who attended the Pupil Participation Have Your Say Day) and the young people who participated in the focus group thought it would be a useful resource for schools in relation to the development of school councils.
- Both teachers and pupils highlighted that the topics covered within the Guidance, were all very relevant and that it covered the information needed for someone who had no prior experience or knowledge of doing so, to begin working on setting up a school council.
- The focus group suggested that it could be improved by including 'case studies', relevant to each of the sections, within the resource, to provide ideas of ways in which to implement the guidance and highlight examples of practice that have worked well for other schools. Including sample minutes, definitions of roles etc. and templates for use by school council members were also suggested as possible additions. These ideas were discussed with the teaching staff during the Pupil Participation 'Have Your Say Day', who agreed that they would be beneficial additions.
- In-keeping with the participative nature of school councils, the pupils within the focus group felt strongly that whilst the Guidance is a beneficial resource for teachers, it would be ideal that an accompanying 'young peoples' version' be developed as this would allow young people to take a leadership role within the school council from an earlier stage and would help them to fully understand their role much better.
- It was highlighted that the pack is a great resource in its current state and that it largely just needs updated in terms of updating policies and updating the design of the pack to make it look less "childish." One suggestion made was that it would be beneficial to have separate Democra Schools Guidance for primary and post-primary schools, as the primary school teachers involved had found very limited resources, targeted specifically at pupil participation/ school councils, at a primary level.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Department of Education NI:

1. In August 2014, the Education Minister made a commitment to review the Circular and if sufficient progress is not made, he would consider the case for stronger action to establish increased pupil participation in schools. The need for this review is clear, considering only 25% of teachers and 7% of pupils who participated in the study were aware of the Circular (Ref. Table 1).

We would recommend that the Department of Education starts this process by setting out the timetable for this review and that such a review should include a focus on the number of school councils or other forms of pupil participation forums that exist, the quality of pupil participation and the impact of the Circular.

2. The Department of Education should strengthen the Circular by placing more emphasis on the right to have views taken seriously, taken into account and acted on.
3. Department of Education to provide more opportunities to support teachers in the development of pupil participation including areas such as ring fencing finance and time, and providing training and networking opportunities.
4. Department of Education to produce a young person's version of the Circular for pupils.
5. Department of Education to promote the Circular in all schools particularly to teachers and pupils to ensure that the Guidance is known and followed.
6. Department of Education to disseminate links to support materials for school councils/Pupil Participation Forum to all schools e.g. NICCY's Democra School; NCB's Building a Culture of Participation; NIYF's Making Your Youth Council Work For You and UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools.
7. It was encouraging to find that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) had engaged with most of the school councils consulted with, during and as part of their school's most recent inspection. However, we would recommend that the Department of Education consider how it can liaise with ETI on pupil participation, with a view to its specific inclusion, as part of the formal inspection process (including self-evaluation) within schools.

Recommendations for the Department of Employment and Learning

1. It has been highlighted that in order for a culture of participation to exist within schools, that all teachers should have a knowledge of and skills relating to participation. As such, a recommendation arising from the workshops with teachers is that pupil participation and its links to the UNCRC should form a specific part of teacher training.



Recommendations for Schools

1. Provide more opportunities for training in pupil participation and school councils for all teachers and governors.
2. Ensure pupils are aware of their rights under the UNCRC and that the UNCRC and rights education should be integrated into the curriculum.
3. Provide training for school council members, such as team building, representation skills, campaigning/lobbying and communication. A priority should be to ensure that pupil participation is enjoyable and meaningful.
4. Ensure that pupils' voices are taken seriously and into account in decision making. Pupils should be involved jointly in the development of policies within schools and the opportunity should exist for pupils to have a say on all aspects of school life including policy, teaching practice, curriculum and school rules.
5. Ensure pupils are involved in designing election/selection processes for school councils and that pupils set the agendas for school council meetings.
6. Work to establish a direct link between pupil participation / schools councils and senior management teams and Boards of Governors and ensure that the school council receives clear feedback/communication from key decision makers.
7. Ensure the school council is actively timetabled to enable all pupils to be involved and ensure the supporting teachers are given the time needed to be effective. Pupil participation should be integral to the curriculum through Learning for Life and Work (post-primary) and Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (primary).
8. All schools should establish a school council and have their own internal pupil participation policy drawn up by pupils and teachers and ratified by Boards of Governors. Schools should ensure that there are mechanisms (in addition to a school council) and a school culture that allows all pupils the opportunity to participate in school life and to have a say on issues that affect them. This should include ensuring opportunities/ support for young people, who experience barriers or, who have been excluded from the process, to be involved in school councils.

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St. Mary's High School, Newry are a 'Rights Respecting School', which is a UNICEF award that recognises achievement in putting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) at the heart of a school's planning, policies, practice and ethos. As part of their Rights Respecting School Student Voice structure, they have a junior council, senior council, senior prefects and a SNAG healthy eating group.

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Recommendations for NICCY:

1. To monitor DE's work on pupil participation and encourage them to complete the recommendations arising from this study.
2. Update the Democra School 'Having Your Say' Guidance in partnership with young people, considering the following:
 - updating the policies within the Democra School Guidance and consider including case studies, samples and templates within it, creating separate versions of the Guidance for primary and post-primary schools, as well as a young persons' version. Also to change the design to include fewer cartoons and primary colours.
3. Promote the Democra School Guidance to primary and post primary schools within Northern Ireland.



Appendix

Department of Education Publications referencing school councils and Pupil Consultation/Participation

1. **'Managing Schools during New Build Projects - A Guide for Principals' (2011)**

Page 3: 'Consult with the children e.g. through the school council, about what they would like to know about the project.'

2. **Research report on 'Audit of Counselling and Other Therapeutic Interventions in Primary and Special Schools in the North of Ireland' (2009)**

Page 1: 'Research evidence demonstrates that counselling is one of a range of services that help to support the health, emotional and social needs of pupils and lead to a healthy school culture. Other elements could include: Seeking pupils' views through school councils and other means'

Page 22: from Table 2.2: Summary of emotional well-being interventions in schools from the literature:

School councils: Effective school councils that meet regularly, have trained participants, consult and communicate well and evaluate annually can give elected pupils a voice to represent all pupils and improve their school.

3. **Every School a Good School: A Strategy for Raising Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy (2008)**

From foreword by Education Minister:

'We are sending this booklet to school councils for them to look at and putting it on our website: www.deni.gov.uk.'

4. **Drugs: Guidance for Schools in Northern Ireland (2009)**

Page 9: Involving Pupils

'Some useful examples of methods for involving and consulting with pupils would be, for example, through school councils, focus and discussion groups and questionnaires.'

5. **Every School A Good School: A Policy for School Improvement (2009)**

Page 39: 'School councils offer an important model to support engagement; however the focus has to be on delivering genuine engagement. We do not wish to prescribe the means but rather we want to encourage all schools to find meaningful ways of giving their pupils a voice – and of listening and responding to the views of young people.'

Page 41: DE's goal in relation to promoting engagement between schools and pupils, parents, families and communities;

'To work with schools to ensure that their pupils are given a voice in the running of the school and that there are strong and effective links between every school and the parents, families and local communities it serves'.

'In pursuit of this goal we will:

provide a resource to support school councils and to encourage all schools to set up councils or other forums to ensure that pupils have a voice in decisions on the running of the school'.

Page 56: Timescale for this: 'Resource for school councils to be commissioned and completed by end 2010'.

6. **Research Report on 'Good Practice in Literacy and Numeracy in British and Irish Cities where the level of Social Deprivation is comparable to, or worse than, Belfast'. (2008)**

Page 11: At a school-level, consideration should be given to...

Strengthening ways of working with parents as partners in all phases through, for example, parent/student workshops, family literacy and numeracy learning activities, school councils and surveys.

7. **Research briefing: Out of School Hours Learning Provision and School Improvement in Northern Ireland (2004)**

Page 11: The following factors are broadly seen as presenting opportunity for provision:

Pupil interest: the majority of principals agreed on the importance of pupil interest.

Suggested ways to increase pupil interest included:

pupil consultation;

pupil involvement, e.g. via school council.

8. Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour (2001)

Page 40: Policy Review:

Page 64: Where weaknesses are found, a review will be necessary. All of the staff, teaching and non-teaching, and the pupils and Governors, should contribute to this review. Pupils can be consulted, for example, through school councils, or in Circle Time or PSE lessons. Where significant changes are contemplated, parents should also be consulted, and, in any event, should be consulted periodically (say every 3 years).

9. School Development Planning (2005)

Page 6: Consultation and Involvement

(c) Pupils, irrespective of age, will have likes/dislikes that will inform the plan positively, they will have their own views on, for example, after-school provision, the organisation of their day, homework, uniform, lunch facilities. Older pupils can be expected also to have views on issues such as curricular choices, careers education and guidance and enrichment courses/activities.

The quality and value of pupils' contribution to improving the life of the school is potentially very great, even among the younger children. It is dependent on the extent to which the Principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate. Consultation can be organised in a variety of ways, such as: by speaking directly with the pupils; the establishment of a school council

10. Every School a Good School - The Governors' Role (2010)

This provides school governors with details of their roles and responsibilities including establishing a school council:

'Many schools have established school councils as a way to enable pupils to express their views and promote issues such as anti-bullying, healthy eating and healthy lifestyles, which affect them and their environment. DE considers that 'the quality and value of pupils' contribution to improving the life of the school is potentially very great, even among the younger children. It is dependent on the extent to which the principal and staff are able to create opportunities and the climate for constructive and positive debate.'

The Board of Governors is encouraged to support this development in its own school. 'Guidance on the establishment and operation of school councils has been issued by the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People.'

