Learning about the Principle of Participation: Possibilities and Barriers in the Professional Formation of Early Childhood Education and Care Students

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Introduction

The principle of participation in Early Childhood Education and Care

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has facilitated a sea-change in the political and legislative landscape in the Republic of Ireland since ratification in 1992. In Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) it has led to a number of key policy shifts, most significantly the national quality and curricular frameworks, Siolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) and Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009), which have resulted in radical changes in how the young child is conceptualised. Both documents are underpinned and demonstrably rooted in the UNCRC and embody a conceptualisation of the child as a rights-holder (Hayes, Donoghue-Hynes and Wolfe, 2013; Waldron, Kavanagh, Maunsell, Oberman, O'Reilly, Pike, Prunty and Ruane, 2011).

The UNCRC is not yet fully incorporated into the Irish constitution, although following a referendum in 2012, two of its principles (the principle of participation, and best interests principle) are now included. Despite this limited incorporation, all professionals who work with children require comprehensive knowledge of these two principles at minimum to understand their implications for their particular practice contexts. The Better Outcomes: Brighter Future Policy Framework 2014-2020 (DCYA, 2014), and constituent strategies, such as The National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2015), and First five: A Whole-of-
Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028 (DCYA, 2018) also require that professionals are knowledgeable about the principle of participation to deliver on their vision. Central to a full appreciation of a child rights-based approach to the education and care of the young child, and derived from article 12 of the UNCRC, this principle has been adopted into the language of the children’s rights discourse. It has been defined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child as:

The ongoing processes which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults, based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcomes of such processes (UN/CRC/C/GC/12, para. 3).

Keeping pace with these advances in the Irish context requires that ECEC educators not only fully understand this principle, but also its interplay with other rights and principles in the UNCRC, particularly the principle of evolving capacity. It requires that ECEC educators are afforded opportunities as part of their professional formation to consider an orientation of their practice more broadly in line with a child rights-based approach to the education and care of young children. Promising commitments to child participation training programmes for ECEC professionals have been made in the recent Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2018). However, considering there are 54 articles in the UNCRC, and as all rights are interrelated and interconnected, ECEC educators need opportunities for tailored education and training about children’s rights more generally. This recommendation has been made by the Ombudsman for Children’s office (2015), the Committee on the Right of the Child (U.N., 2016) and mirrored in the ECEC literature (Nutbrown, 2018; Zanatta, 2018; Robson, 2016; MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith, 2007).

**Children’s Rights Education for the ECEC Educator**

A growing body of international literature on effective children’s rights education (CRE) models has emerged in recent years, particularly for primary and secondary school teachers, derived from but not synonymous with human rights education models.
(Jerome, Emerson, Lundy and Orr, 2015). Less is known about how ECEC educators should gain knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC and children’s rights to enable them to enact children’s rights in their everyday work with young children (Robson, 2016; Jerome et al., 2015). While some international research has highlighted some lack of impact of the UNCRC on early childhood programmes and curricula (Robson, 2016; Di Santo and Kenneally, 2014; Konstantoni, 2013), in the Irish context, Aistear and Siolta have provided the young child with a curricular entitlement for CRE and, by extension, their educators. This raises critical questions about the need for an explicit children’s rights education model for ECEC in Ireland and if any reorientation is necessary (Lundy and Tobin, 2018).

It has been argued that specific models of CRE are indeed required to address the challenges and particular needs of professional groups in their local contexts (Cardenas, 2005). However, if the focus is too much on the abstract or legalistic substance of the UNCRC, it insufficiently engages with the political, cultural and social dimensions of young children’s lived experiences (Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie and Vandevelde, 2010). This could make it difficult for ECEC students to become conversant in children’s rights in practice (Lansdown and Damsted, 2007; Flowers, 2004). Likewise, it may not empower them to take action and build cultures that respect children’s human rights (Struthers, 2014). On the other hand, reductionist or narrow understandings of the principle of participation drawn from practice such as ‘voice’ and ‘choice’ can become detached from the underlying philosophy and core concepts of the UNCRC, which in turn could prevent students from recognising the full complexity of the children’s rights framework and its implications for their pedagogical decision-making (Waldron et al., 2011; Lundy, 2007). Lundy’s (2007) observation that rights compliance can be perceived as requiring too much effort, has been highlighted in studies where certain ‘inhibitors to participative decision-making’ such as time, resources, curriculum requirements and practitioners’ views on children’s capacity to make decisions, have been identified (Hudson, 2012:11). These issues suggest a need for an intentional model of CRE deeply contextualised to ECEC that could integrate both the legal and
ECEC perspectives, and yet be flexible and creative enough to address barriers and tensions, unique to ECEC.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to investigate whether, to what extent and in what ways a group of undergraduate students in one HEI context in the Republic of Ireland were informed about and understand children’s rights through their education in Early Childhood Education and Care in order to fulfil the international legal obligations on government under the UNCRC, particularly under articles 28, 29 and 42. Five focused research questions drove the project.

- What do a group of early childhood education and care students know and understand about children’s rights?
- How do they conceptualise the child in early childhood education and care contexts?
- Where have this group of early childhood education and care students acquired the knowledge, practices and values required to implement the UNCRC, particularly Articles 28, 29 and 42?
- Do they value children’s rights as a knowledge and skills base for their practice with young children?
- How do they frame their role in relation to educating others about children’s rights?

Methodology

The research adopted a predominantly convergent parallel mixed-methods approach comprising of a specially designed quantitative questionnaire and focus group discussions (FGDs). Both strands were kept independent during analysis and results were then merged (Creswell, 2014).
Sample
A purposive sample of ECEC students were selected. 144 registered students across years 1, 2 and 3 on a BA (Hons) Early Childhood Education and Care programme in one Institute of Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland were invited to participate. The response rate for the questionnaire was 53.47% (n=77) and respondents were fairly evenly distributed across the three stages of the programme. All of the respondents identified as female, and the mean age of the sample was 21.61 years (SD=4.23), with a range from 18 to 38 years. Of the sample, 3.9% (n=3) were international students. For the qualitative strand, 32 self-selected participants took part in five FGDs which included participants with previous qualifications and mature students (over age 23).

Data analysis
Data from the questionnaires were analysed statistically using SPSS 22. For each of the 70 items on the questionnaire, means and standard deviations were calculated. Aggregate as well as year 1, year 2 and year 3 frequencies (numbers and percentages) were compiled. In order to explore and explain certain associations and relationships between concepts or variables a number of cross tabulations were also carried out to analyse any relationship between variables such as students’ age, previous studies, direct work experience with children and stage of study. The qualitative data generated by the FGDs were analysed thematically, using a six-step inductive process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three open-ended questions included in the questionnaire were also analysed thematically.

Ethics
Permission to conduct this doctoral study was obtained from the research ethics committee of the research site, and ethical approval was granted by QUB. Recruitment, informed consent processes, right to withdraw, privacy and non-coercion were key considerations of insider research with student participants, and this required constant, critical reflection on the part of the researcher, which was aided by the application and adaption of Osler and Starkey’s (2010) rights-based pedagogical principles to the research context to help counteract any potential influences on participants.
Theoretical Framework
This study drew on a theoretical framework informed by children’s rights legal theory, and the commentary, recommendations and concluding observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. In addition, socio-cultural theory and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2003) was used to provide a critical reading of the processes and relational structures of initial education of ECEC students, related to children’s rights in ECEC as experienced by the participants.

Limitations

The focus of this study was on gaining detailed information about a small population contained in one Institute of Higher Education, limited to a specific geographical region, and therefore cannot, nor does not attempt to make generalisations about larger populations or phenomena. It does not claim to evaluate the effectiveness of the undergraduate programme in delivering CRE, but rather the claim is that the analyses might yield sufficient evidence to provide a good basis for making analytical generalisations and sound recommendations for rights-based practice and CRE for ECEC students. Although outside the scope of this study, omission of formal inquiry into the perspectives of children, ECEC practice educators/mentors who support students on supervised professional practice and academic staff who were involved in teaching on the programme was a limitation, which will be addressed in future research.

Findings

The findings present a mixed picture of participants’ engagement with the children’s rights framework and the interconnections between their emergent understandings of the young child as a rights-holder in ECEC contexts. The themes that emerged in this study, status and credibility; curricular entitlements; traditions and paternalism
to where some of the possibilities, resistances and barriers might lie for students in learning about children’s rights and their role as future educators and duty bearers under articles 29 and 42 in particular. The findings reported in this article relate to possibilities under the theme of curricular entitlements.

**Curricular entitlements**

The study found that an undergraduate education in ECEC was a firm foundation upon which to create space on the curriculum to build students’ understanding of children’s rights and the principle of participation. The findings highlighted some of the ways in which *Aistear*, in particular, as an open-ended curriculum framework that embraces a plurality of value systems and curricular approaches has provided a strong platform to embed a rights-based approach in ECEC practice. One questionnaire respondent (year 3) explained the curricular entitlement to CRE provided by *Aistear* in the following way:

> “*Aistear links with different children’s rights when implementing its themes and learning goals. Children need to be heard and listened to. Aistear operationalises children’s rights.*”

Showing a growing sensitivity to the language of article 12, another questionnaire respondent (year 2) wrote:

> “*Children have the right to participate in all decisions and should be taken into consideration on their level of understanding of the issue*”

However, some vital elements appeared to be missing across the entire dataset, in particular the adult’s role in building the young child’s capacity to understand the issues under consideration, which suggested that participants did not have a full understanding of the principle of participation.

The majority of questionnaire respondents across years 1, 2 and 3 agreed that young children in ECEC contexts had the right to participate in all decisions that affect them, as the table below shows.
Table 1. Participants’ views on the principle of participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent do you agree with the following statements</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children have the right to participate in all decisions that affect them</td>
<td>93.5% (n=72)</td>
<td>3.9% (n=3)</td>
<td>2.6% (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children have a right to participate in all decisions that affect them in early years services</td>
<td>85.7% (n=66)</td>
<td>11.7% (n=9)</td>
<td>2.6% (n=2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s right to participate is promoted in early years services</td>
<td>74.1% (n=57)</td>
<td>18.2% (n=14)</td>
<td>7.8% (n=6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s rights are respected by adults in early years services</td>
<td>61.1% (n=47)</td>
<td>22.1% (n=17)</td>
<td>15.6% (n=12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general Children’s rights are respected by adults in Irish Society</td>
<td>39% (n=30)</td>
<td>44.2% (n=34)</td>
<td>15.6% (n=12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is striking about this table above, is the differences respondents perceived between how ECEC educators respected young children’s rights versus how they perceived children’s rights to be respected in mainstream society. This may be an indication of slow progress of the Government under article 42, against a background of slow cultural change.

Imperfect summaries of the principle of participation

The FGD data revealed that participants sometimes had an incomplete understanding of the principle of participation. Lack of conceptual clarity could mean that some of the imperfect summaries of the principle of participation (Lundy, 2007) they suggested, such as ‘taking part’, ‘being involved in activities’, ‘having a go’ and ensuring ‘nobody gets left out’, could impact on their pedagogical decision-making. The word participation has multiple meanings and pedagogical value for educators, when drawing on socio-cultural theory. However, in the context of their human rights under the UNCRC, the principle of participation has a particular meaning which places specific obligations on adults as
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duty bearers. For one FGD participant (year 3) their understanding of this role had paternalistic overtones:

“At preschool age I believe children are too young to make decisions for themselves. They need ethical adults that know them well to make decisions for them in their best interests”.

These findings suggest some of the participants were not yet able to recognize the full remit of the principle of participation. In particular there was little recognition of the obligation of the adult to give young children’s views due weight and to presume the child is capable of forming their own views no matter what age, and recognise the child’s right to express them (U.N, 2009). This could mean that interpretations of the principle of participation which may have been influenced by socio-cultural understanding of children’s learning and development, or other disciplines without enough explicit reference to the children’s rights framework could potentially blur and dilute the full meaning of this principle in practice.

Discussion

The status of the UNCRC is affirmed through Aistear which provides for a broad-based, integrated approach to curriculum which involves young children in planning, implementation and review of their learning. Though not as yet on a statutory footing for all young children from birth to age six, it provides children with a curricular entitlement for CRE. Reflecting the principle of participation, it provides the means of enhancing young children’s visible role as rights-holders and stakeholders in their own education (Hayes et al., 2013; Waldron et al., 2011; Lundy and McEvoy, 2008).

Similar to Di Santo and Kenneally (2014) this study found that there is little need for the development of information ‘packs’ or ‘toolkits’ for ‘teaching’ very young children about their rights. This study suggests, that full enactment of children’s rights in early
Childhood, as elsewhere, is through relationships that value all of the rights of the child. Although a small amount of the language is problematic from a rights-perspective, there is no need for a significant reorientation or readjustment (Lundy and Tobin, 2018) of the ECEC curricular framework in the Republic of Ireland to enable educators to implement articles 29 (1) and 42 more fully or to enable young children’s participation in ECEC contexts (Hudson, 2012). Instead, the realisation of children’s rights in ECEC settings can be an organic and collaborative project that can arise in each and every democratic space young children occupy. What is critical however, are rights-informed and respected ECEC educators who have been given time and space during their professional formation to engage with Aistear in a rights respecting way.

Despite the potential and rich possibilities of Aistear and Siolta, and an undergraduate degree in ECEC, participants in this study did not appear, for the most part, to have a full appreciation of the principle of participation. This could mean that tensions could arise in their interpretation of other children’s rights and the full enactment of a rights-based approach in early childhood education and care. The findings reflect the views of Lansdown and Damsted (2007) and Flowers (2004) who argue that in order to support learning about children’s rights, ECEC students require more than just awareness-raising or exposure to information on the UNCRC, they also need opportunities to learn about, see and enact rights-based practices and pedagogical principles. Given the centrality of experiential learning for both ECEC and CRE, an explicit, transformative and participatory approach to the initial practitioner education of the ECEC student is therefore required to enable the substance of children’s rights education to emerge through the interplay of CRE teaching and learning strategies with the established initial practitioner education of the ECEC student.

Conclusion

Although key stakeholders, the invisibility of ECEC students’ perspectives in much of the literature and policy debates on children’s rights in general and CRE in particular, has
meant that some of the possibilities as well as complexities and tensions involved in learning about the principle of participation might have remained obscured until now. This study concludes that a systematic organization of all of the education climate, processes and relationships of ECEC initial practitioner education, in line with transformative learning theory and a participatory and child rights-based approach is required. Critically reflective and locally negotiated models for the initial education of ECEC educators would ensure a stronger pedagogical foundation to empower them to protect, respect and take action for young children's participation rights and all other rights under the UNCRC.
References


