

Children's Participation

The Perspectives of Educational Welfare Officers on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making, prior to the Implementation of the Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support

KEY FINDINGS



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Overview

This document presents the key findings and recommendations from a study conducted with Educational Welfare Officers on children and young people's participation in planning meetings concerning their school attendance. The term 'participation' refers to the right of children and young people to express their views on decisions of relevance to them and for their views to be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Article 12, UN Convention on the rights of the Child). Tusla's understanding of participation is underpinned by the Lundy model.

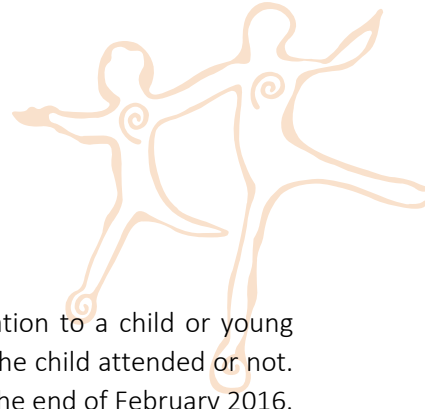
The Lundy model identifies four elements which are essential to the realisation of a child's right to participate. First, 'space': children and young people must be provided with the opportunity to express a view in a space that is safe and inclusive. Second, 'voice': children and young people must be facilitated to express their view. Third, 'audience': the view must be listened to. Fourth, 'influence': the view must be acted upon as appropriate, and the reasons for the decision taken must be communicated to the child or young person.

Aims and Objectives

The **aim** of the research was to explore the extent to which children and young people participate in decisions on their school attendance, at planning meetings convened by Tusla's Educational Welfare Services.

The objectives were:

1. To explore if children and young people across the age range of 6-16 years participate in these meetings.
2. To ascertain to what level the child or young person participates in decision-making and if this participation is compliant with the Lundy Model of Participation.
3. To examine Educational Welfare Officers level of self-assessed competence to engage children and young people in decision-making.
4. To establish the views of Educational Welfare Officers on factors that enable or impede participation in decision-making and the benefits to children and young people in the process.
5. To make recommendations and raise awareness within Educational Welfare Services about supporting children and young people's participation.



Research Method

Educational Welfare Officers completed a questionnaire each time a meeting was held in relation to a child or young person's school attendance over a six-week period. The questionnaire was completed whether the child attended or not. In total, 56 questionnaires were completed by Educational Welfare Officer from mid-January to the end of February 2016. In addition, eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with Educational Welfare Officers were conducted in February and March 2016 and analysed.

Key Findings

- The age range of children and young people who participated in meetings was 6-15 years and the majority of the children were in the 13-15 year age range.
- More than half the children and young people did not attend the meetings (57%). Of those that did attend, the majority of the Educational Welfare Officers (75%) were of the view that the children and young people participated in decisions taken in accordance with the Lundy Model of participation.
- At the time of the data collection there was no competency-based training on children and young people's participation available for Educational Welfare Officers.
- It was perceived that the participation of children and young people at meetings is at the discretion of the individual Educational Welfare Officers. Officers were not always familiar with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and strategy documents published by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla on children and young people's participation in decisions that affect their lives.
- The key factors that were reported to facilitate children and young people's participation, were: the child or young person felt there was someone on their side to speak on their behalf to the school (for example an advocate); the parents were engaged in the process; and the quality of the relationship with the Educational Welfare Officer.
- The key barriers that prevent the participation of children and young people were: the age and maturity of the child or young person; the child or young person's lack of confidence, trust, anxiety, mental health issues and special educational need; and the relationship with the school, particularly if there are behavioural issues.
- The key benefits of children and young people's participation in planning meetings were: the responsibility and confidence that it gave the child or young person, as this led to participation of the child or young person in other areas of their life; and better outcomes, as the child or young person was included in the formulation of the plan.

This study was part of a minor dissertation submitted to the National University of Ireland, Galway in anticipation of the degree of Masters of Arts in Family Support Studies. To access all research reports from the Children's Participation work package please visit <http://www.childandfamilyresearch.ie/cfrc/mainstream/ourworktoday/>

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