Chapter 12
Student participation during inspection in primary and post-primary schools: a rights-respecting approach

Introduction

The right of children and young people to participate in decisions on all matters affecting them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).[1] Article 12 specifically relates to the child's right to express their views freely and to have their views given due weight. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) advises that schools, as well as bodies providing services for children, establish permanent ways of consulting with children in all decisions concerning their functioning.[2] The department's Inspectorate is one such body. As inspection affects children, it is, therefore, a matter about which they are entitled to have their views sought, listened to and taken into account. Research shows that children have views about inspection and want to express them.[3]

A key principle of the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate* (2024)[4] is that inspectors will seek and give due weight to the views and opinions of learners, according to their age and maturity. This commitment borrows directly from article 12. The Inspectorate considers children as agentive and competent social actors. It recognises their unique and valuable contribution to the inspection process in offering unique and honest views on school and classroom practice.

Article 12

"Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

UNCRC, 1989

This chapter highlights the benefits of student participation, provides detail of approaches taken to encourage student participation in inspection and some resultant findings, and outlines some related projects underway in the Inspectorate and the wider department.

The benefits of student participation

The benefits of student participation are widely acknowledged. They include the creation of a stronger sense of agency where students realise that they can have impact on things that matter,[5] the enhancement of status through recognition of their capacity as insightful commentators[6] and honing their

1 Convention on the rights of the child (1989). Treaty no. 27531. United Nations Treaty Series, 1577

2 Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001). The aims of education (General Comments) CRC/C/GC/2001/1, 17 April 2001

3 Conneely, S. (2015). Children's right to be heard during whole-school evaluation in Irish primary schools: student's and teachers' perspectives. Doctoral Thesis, Queens University Belfast. Available at: https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/childrens-right-to-be-heard-duringwhole-school-evaluation-in-iris

4 Department of Education (2024). Code of Practice for the Inspectorate Dublin: Inspectorate. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspection-guidelines/#code-of-practice-for-the-inspectorate

5 Rudduck, J. and Fielding, M. (2006). Student voice and the perils of popularity. *Educational Review*, vol. 58 (2), pp 219–231

6 Frost, D. and MacBeath, J. (2010). Learning to lead: an evaluation. University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

thought processes by enabling them to think critically about their experiences.[7] According to Lansdown (2011),[8] a 'virtuous circle' is created; the more children participate, the more effective their contributions and the greater the impact on their development.

Educational stakeholders also highlight considerable benefits from student participation, such as improvements in service provision and decision-making.[9] In addition to these advantages, teachers, inspectors and policymakers gain access to the specialist and largely untapped knowledge that students have about their schools.[10] Furthermore, as students have a unique perspective on what happens in school and classrooms,[11] many student voice projects can act as a catalyst for change in schools, including improvements in teaching and curriculum.[12]

Consultation with students enriches the inspection process. The UNCRC emphasises that children and young people are expert in their own lives with much to tell and share to help decision-makers to make decisions about matters that affect them. As part of the inspection process, students' views are sought, listened to, given due weight and acted upon. From inspection, we know that students can offer important insights into areas such as learning, facilities, activities, safety, atmosphere and homework. This information forms part of the evidence base for inspection. The Inspectorate works to ensure that the elicitation of children and young people's views does not occur mainly to serve institutional ends. We work to ensure that involvement is beneficial for them, as well as for schools and the Inspectorate.

We believe that we have an important role in advocating for students' rights generally. The core objectives of child advocacy include elevating the status of children, enhancing their self-determination and ensuring that institutions are responsive and accountable to their needs.[13]

Student participation in inspection

Involving children and young people in inspection is not new. As part of the inspection process, the Inspectorate has elicited their views formally through use of surveys and focus groups for many years.

More recently, the Inspectorate considered whether the purpose and method of our engagement sufficiently emphasised children's agency or did justice to the principle enshrined in article 12. We wanted to do more than treat children's views as a data source. We wanted to facilitate them to express their views freely during inspection and to have their views given due weight as part of an empowering process.

7 Roberts, J. and Nash, A. (2009). Enabling students to participate in school improvement through students as researchers programme. *Improving Schools*, 2009, vol. 12(2), pp 174–187

8 Lansdown, G. (2011). Every Child's Right to be Heard. *Save the Children UK*, p.6. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/every-childs-right-be-heard-resource-guide-un-committee-rights-child-general-comment-no-12

9 Shier, H. (2008). Pathways to participation revisited Nicaragua perspective. *New Zealand Association for Intermediate and Middle Schooling*, Issue Two Dialogue and Debate. November

10 Czerniawski, G. (2012). Student voice-by-numbers. *Research in Secondary Teacher Education*, April 2012, vol.2 (1), pp 14–18

11 Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in today's schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 59.2: 182–191

12 Fielding, M. (2004). Transformative approaches to student voice: theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(2), 295–311. https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000195236

13 Smith, Anne. (2007). Children's Rights and Early Childhood Education: Links to Theory and Advocacy. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. 32. 1–8. 10.1177/183693910703200302

The Inspectorate has taken an incremental approach to enhancing student participation in the inspection process. We designed a child-centred, rights-respecting methodology that explicitly includes the voice of children in the work of the Inspectorate. A rights-respecting approach acknowledges students' fundamental right to be part of every decision that affects them as a matter of principle.[14] It takes children's views seriously, bearing in mind their age and maturity, and recognises the unique and invaluable contribution that they can make to the inspection process.

Over the period 2020–2024, the Inspectorate worked with advisory groups of children and young people in developing materials and approaches for inspection. The approach and methods we use emphasise children's agency – in this way, they are strengths-based. We implement targeted strategies to support children in forming their views on important issues when necessary. We also work to create the right conditions that allow children, regardless of their age, to express their opinions. This approach leads to multiple benefits for inspections and schools, including better decision-making and improved outcomes.

This methodology was influenced by research undertaken within the Inspectorate and support from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality,[15] schools and early learning and care settings. The *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making*[16] and the Lundy Model (2007)[17] were influential in progressing this work. Lundy conceptualised article 12 as encompassing space (opportunity to express a view), voice (facilitation to express a view), audience (to be listened to) and influence (views to be acted upon, as appropriate). The goal for the Inspectorate was to enhance opportunities for children's participation at all three stages of inspection: before, during and after.

A three-stage approach

The Inspectorate is continually seeking to improve how it seeks, listens and takes on board the views of children and young people. Currently, we are taking a three-stage approach to increasing the involvement of children before, during and after inspection.

Before inspection

In 2024, the OECD emphasised the importance of providing children with information to empower them effectively.[18] Adults have a key role in supporting and enabling children's right to a voice in decision-making.[19] The Inspectorate supports the principle, informed by article 5 of the UNCRC and advocated by Lundy and McEvoy (2012),[20] that children have the right to information and adult guidance while their views are in formation. This helps them in determining and expressing a developed and informed view.

14 Lansdown, G. (2011). Every Child's Right to be Heard. Save the Children UK. Available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/every-childs-right-be-heard-resource-guide-un-committee-rights-child-general-comment-no-12

15 Previously the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

16 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015). National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015 – 2020. Dublin: Government Publications. Available at: www.dcya.ie

17 Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice is not enough': conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for education. *British Education Research Journal*, December 2007, vol. 33(6), pp 927–942

18 OECD (2024). What Does Child Empowerment Mean Today? Implications for Education and Well-being. *Educational Research and Innovation*, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1787/8f80ce38-en

19 Convention on the rights of the child (1989). Treaty no. 27531. Article 5

20 Lundy, L. and McEvoy, L. (2012). Children's rights and research processes: Assisting children to (in) formed views. *Childhood*, 19(1), pp 129–144

There is a need to be clear with children and young people about the purpose of inspection, the role of the inspector and how their engagement with the inspection process will transact. Children have told us that advance information about the purpose of inspection and the role of the inspector would help to alleviate fears, ensure consistent messaging and enhance their readiness to participate. They gave advice on the information that would be relevant and the most effective ways to share such information. Consequently, a suite of resources, including information leaflets and animated videos for children in early years, primary and post primary, including an e-book for the early years, was developed in consultation with them. These are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/inspectorate-department-of-education/.

During inspection

The Inspectorate is continually looking at ways to improve our engagement with children and young people during inspection. The Inspectorate has extended the use of focus groups to almost all inspection types where schools get advance notice of an inspection. Our work in focus groups is underpinned by certain principles, reflecting those recommended by the CRC: to be transparent, informative, voluntary, respectful, relevant, children friendly, inclusive (non-discriminatory), safe and sensitive to risk. We use best practice regarding consent, assent and child safeguarding.

Children provided advice about what would best help them to decide whether to participate in focus groups. Consequently, we developed informational videos about how focus groups operate during inspection. In 2024, we also launched a webinar for teachers about the Inspectorate's approach to strengthening student participation in inspection. All resources are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/campaigns/inspectorate-department-of-education/.

After inspection

Inspectors undertake post-evaluation meetings with the leadership and teaching staff of schools to discuss the findings and recommendations following an inspection. Afterwards, a report issues to the school leaders for response. The report is uploaded subsequently to the department's website for public access.

Until 2024, inspectors wrote these reports solely with an adult readership in mind. Children and young people recommended that we extend our reporting practice to include them. In September 2024, the Inspectorate introduced a student-friendly page within all curriculum evaluation reports in primary schools and subject inspection reports in post-primary schools.

Children and young people have been very positive about the page, particularly about what it meant in terms of acknowledging their right to information and their participation within schools and the education system.

The page was developed through consultation with school leaders, teachers and students. They made other recommendations about how to further enhance information sharing with students following an inspection, including post-evaluation meetings. We aim to explore the feasibility of implementing these ideas in the future through further research.

Findings from student surveys during inspection

During whole-school evaluation (WSE), surveys are administered to students to elicit views on their experience of school and learning. In 2024, the Inspectorate administered 6,121 surveys in primary schools and 7,350 in post-primary schools. The surveys indicate that a high proportion of children and young people feel that their opinions are listened to at school.

In primary schools, a little over 50% agreed that their opinions were listened to in their school all of the time, while 38% agreed that this happened most of the time. 10% indicated that this happened sometimes, with just over 1% of the view that it never happened.

The survey in post-primary schools asked students whether they thought that teachers listened to them. Almost 69% agreed that this happened all of the time, with almost 21% agreeing that it happened most of the time. Almost 10% of post-primary respondents indicated that teachers listened sometimes. Under 1% were of the view that teachers never listened to them.

Much of the research literature tells us that there is a very positive disposition toward children's voice generally.[21] However, others would argue that children's voice is not universally embraced as an integral part of school life.[22] There is untapped potential in hearing students' views about teaching approaches, curriculum implementation and assessment strategies.[23, 24]

The national *Participation Framework*[25] and the *Action Plan 2024–2028*[26] aim to empower children to play a more active and meaningful role in the decision-making processes within their schools. While findings from 2024 inspection surveys indicate that most children and young people felt that their teachers listened to them and that their opinions were heard, school staff and leadership should assess how well they empower children to influence their own learning and participate in decision making. Hub na nÓg,[27] the national centre of excellence and coordination in children and young people's participation in decision making, offers essential tools to assist schools in planning, implementing and assessing participation initiatives. In addition, the newly established student participation unit within the department, discussed later in this chapter, intends to provide further guidance to schools.

What focus groups with students during inspection told us

Inspection reports from 2024 tell of children's willingness to be involved in focus groups and their ready and positive engagement in discussion about their learning. Inspection reports are available to read at www.gov.ie/DEInspectorate.

During focus groups, students spoke of various issues relevant to their school context. For example, in some post-primary schools, students commended the teachers' sharing of the learning intentions and success criteria as useful elements in lessons. They spoke about positive experiences of classroom-based assessments (CBAs), where they could research and share their passion about particular subjects of interest to them. In other post-primary schools, they spoke about the high levels of individualised support available from their teachers if they had any difficulties.

21 Martinez Sainz, G., Devine, D., Sloan, S., Symonds, J., Moore, B., Barrow, N. and Ioannidou, O. (2024). A rights-based exploration of children's pedagogic voice in the classroom. *Education* 3-13, 52(6), 874–890. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2331953

22 Brown, M., McNamara, G., Cinkir, S., Fadar, J., Figuiredo, M., Vanhoof, J., Skerrit, C., O'Brien, S., Kurum, G., O'Hara, J. and Rocha, J. (2020). Parent and student voice in evaluation and planning in schools. *Improving Schools*, 32(1), pp 85–102

23 Martinez Sainz et al. (2024). A rights-based exploration of children's pedagogic voice in the classroom. *Education* 3–13, 52(6), 874–890. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2331953

24 Fleming, D. P. (2013). Student voice in Irish post-primary schools: a drama of voices. PhD Thesis, University College Cork

25 Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DECDIY) (2019). *Participation Framework National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making*. Available at: https://hubnanog.ie/participation-framework/

26 DCEDIY (2024). *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making: Action Plan 2024–2028*. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/participation-of-children-and-young-people-in-decision-making-action-plan-2024-2028/

27 Hub na nÓg is a DCDE initiative: https://hubnanog.ie/

For example:

> *"They … spoke about the range of support materials made available to them online. These included in-class presentations, study notes, online clips and worked examples provided by the teachers. The lunchtime maths club was also mentioned where students could get additional support."*
>
> ***Post-primary report***

Primary and post-primary students spoke positively of resources used at school-level to support their learning. For example:

> *"They mentioned that the use of videos and analogies supported their understanding of difficult concepts, while online quizzes and the use of the school's digital platform to share notes and other support material also reinforced their learning."*
>
> ***Post-primary report***

> *"Aspects of provision which pupils found particularly beneficial were the increased use of mathematical games, information and communications technology in lessons and the integration of Mathematics with other areas of the curriculum. They also enjoyed using mathematics applications and enthusiastically described Zoom calls with experts in Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) as particularly engaging."*
>
> ***Primary report***

Students also identified what would further support their learning. For example:

> *"Additional practices they identified that would further support their learning were lunchtime book borrowing opportunities; more choice and inclusion in the poems and texts studied; and more visual and audio supports for learning."*
>
> ***Post-primary report***

> *"… they noted that they were better able to understand concepts through discussion and practical work. They highlighted some previous beneficial learning experiences, such as when they went outside to explore area and perimeter, by measuring the pitch, goal posts and bench, and to find shapes in the environment."*
>
> ***Primary report***

Recent developments in the Inspectorate and department

Enhancing opportunities for younger primary-school children

The UNCRC does not impose a lower age limit on the right to participate and the CRC discourages the introduction of age limits, either in law or in practice, that restrict the child's right to participation in decision-making. Article 12 acknowledges that children, like adults, have different levels of competence at different stages of their lives. The CRC advises that we start with the presumption that the child has the capacity to form their own views and the right to express them; it is not up to the child to first prove capacity (CRC/C/GC/12, 2009). Research confirms that young children can provide valuable insights into how they perceive their education experiences.[28] Children's capacity for consultation varies more according to their experience than their age.[29]

In 2023–2024, the Inspectorate undertook research in a number of junior primary schools, of which there are ninety across Ireland.

To this point, the Inspectorate had not used focus group or surveys to elicit children's views in junior primary schools. The research team considered appropriate approaches and tools to enable younger children to express their views fully, safely, freely and in appropriate ways, including the use of talking props and icebreakers. From September 2025, focus groups for curriculum evaluations will be introduced in junior primary schools.

Student Participation Unit

Professor Laura Lundy has described Ireland as an international leader in its efforts to engage children meaningfully in policy and public decision-making.[30] As outlined in the *Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020*,[31] Ireland was the first country in Europe, in 2015, to develop a national strategy on children's participation in decision-making.[32] That strategy was succeeded by *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*[33] *(2023–2028)* and the *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan (2024–2028)*[34].

28 Ring, E. and O' Sullivan, L. (2018). Play as learning – implications for educators and parents from findings of a national evaluation of school readiness in Ireland. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328330480

29 Alderson, P. (1995). Listening to Children: Children, Ethics and Social Research. Barnados, Illford

30 Lundy, L. (2024). Introduction to Background Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation. Department of Education, Ireland, p. 8. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/student-participation-in-education/#report-of-expert-group-on-student-participation

31 Department of Education (2022). Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/inspectorate-publications/#chief-inspector-reports

32 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2015). National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015–2020. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/national-strategy-on-children-and-young-peoples-participation-in-decision-making/

33 Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/young-ireland/

34 Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/participation-of-children-and-young-people-in-decision-making-action-plan-2024-2028/

Both the framework and action plan are underpinned by the UNCRC and commit to the voices of children and young people being heard and listened to in matters affecting them.[35]

In April 2023, the department published *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying 2023–2027*.[36] The plan contained a key action to establish a dedicated unit to promote the voice of children in the department, including in curriculum development, policy development processes and inspection, and to ensure they had a meaningful input into the development of department policy. The department established the student participation unit in April 2023.

An expert group led by Professor Laura Lundy, and which included the Inspectorate, advised on the establishment of the student participation unit. The expert group's work was guided by input from 174 children. Reports from the expert group, namely the *Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation*,[37] the *Background Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation*[38] and the *Report on Consultations with Children and Young People*,[39] inform the work of the unit. The *Department's Student Participation Implementation Plan* was published in October 2024.[40]

The implementation plan contains fifty actions to support the department to further embed a culture of participation of children and young people into policy development from autumn 2024 to end 2026. Amongst these is a commitment to raising awareness of the importance and benefits of children's participation in decision-making among students, parents, teachers, school leaders, school staff and boards of management. At the end of the period, the department will publish an implementation report, which will be heavily informed by the views of children.

35 Department of Education (2024). Background Report of the Expert Group on Student Participation, p. 15. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/background-report-of-the-expert-group-on-student-participation.pdf

36 Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/cine%C3%A1ltas-action-plan-on-bullying/

37 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/report-of-the-expert-group-on-student-participation.pdf

38 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/background-report-of-the-expert-group-on-student-participation.pdf

39 Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/final-report-on-the-public-consultation-on-a-new-policy-framework-for-children-and-you.pdf

40 Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/student-participation-in-education/

Inspectorate actions in the department's implementation plan

In the implementation plan, the Inspectorate committed to three specific actions:

1. publish an annual newsletter for children and young people about the work of the Inspectorate and to publish other student-friendly reports based on the outcomes of the Inspectorate's work and research in schools
2. publish a video series that highlights good practice in children and young people's participation, leadership and policy development, as observed by the Inspectorate in primary and post-primary schools
3. include a student-friendly summary page in inspection reports on curriculum evaluations in primary schools and in inspection reports on subject inspections in post-primary schools.

Considering each of the three in turn:

Action 1: In 2023, and again in 2024, the Chief Inspector published a newsletter for children and young people informing them about the work of the Inspectorate and the inspection programme for that year.[41] In its 2023/2024 webinar for teachers, the Inspectorate also outlined why and how it elicits children's views during inspection. In addition, in 2024, two videos were published in which children and young people interviewed the Chief Inspector about their right to be heard during an inspection.

Action 2: In 2023–2024, the Inspectorate worked closely with primary and post-primary schools in sharing examples of student participation and leadership. We published four videos, recorded in schools, where school leaders, teachers and students talk about their student participation experience. The videos, available on www.gov.ie/DEInspectorateInformation for children and young people about inspection, showcase what is happening in the schools, as a means to encourage other schools to enhance student participation and leadership. A fifth video is due to be published in 2025–2026. Over time, further videos will be added to the series.

Action 3: As noted earlier, the student-friendly summary page in inspection reports was introduced.

Update on the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill, 2019

The Charter Bill has been passed by the Seanad and, at the time of the publication of this report, is awaiting a date for committee stage in the Dáil. The aim of the Charter Bill is to improve the school community's level of engagement by inviting feedback, comment and observations from children and parents, and by further developing a listening culture in schools.[42] The Charter Bill reflects the department's commitment to promoting schools' engagement with children, parents and the whole-school community. This legislation will provide greater clarity for children and their parents on what they can expect from schools, and will help to ensure that schools, children and parents continue to work effectively in partnership together.

41 Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/information-for-children-and-young-people-about-inspection/

42 Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/student-and-parent-charter/

Once the Bill is passed, and following consultation with education stakeholders, the Minister for Education and Youth will publish charter guidelines to inform how schools will consult with, seek feedback from and respond to children and their parents. The charter legislation and guidelines have potential to support student and parental engagement in school self-evaluation (SSE) and will continue to inform the Inspectorate's developmental work in enhancing its engagement with students and parents in inspection processes.

In conclusion

The Inspectorate actively promotes the participation of children and young people in its inspections, publications and various presentations to stakeholders. Our published inspection guides, for example, advocate that all children should be given a voice, recognising them as key stakeholders. School inspection provides students with an opportunity to express their views about the quality of provision they experience. Enabling their participation plays a role in advocating for children's rights in schools/settings generally.

We believe that student participation in inspection can provide considerable benefits for the Inspectorate, children, young people and schools. The Inspectorate is continually seeking to improve how we seek, listen to and take on board children and young people's views. We have opted to take a Do-and-then-Do-More approach. In so doing, we commit to revisiting our approach for each of the three stages of inspection and, through consultative processes, to do more each time. We are committed to equity and excellence in how we work with children and young people.

Ensuring purposeful participation for children and young people is a learning journey for the Inspectorate, as for schools. More needs to be done; student participation will continue to be part of our core mission as an Inspectorate.