

CHILD VOICE AND GMGY

SUPPORT MATERIALS - GMGY



WHAT IS CHILD VOICE?

Recent years have seen a growing recognition of the right of children to have their voices listened to on matters affecting their lives. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Ireland in 1992, was a significant milestone in this development. Article 12, in particular, has resonance for this conversation. It states that:

State 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.

Such recognition aims to empower children to take an active part in decisions that involve them. It seeks to ensure that children have a say on the matters that affect them in their lives. Ultimately, this article recognises children as citizens with a stake in their community and society, and consequently, the right to have their voices listened to. This far-reaching article applies to all areas of society, school included.

It is significant that there are two aspects to Article 12. The first asserts the right of each child who is capable of forming views the right to express those views freely on matters affecting them. The second aspect protects the child's right to have their views listened to and acted upon.



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WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Laura Lundy (2007) noted that in previous research on children's rights in Northern Ireland that 'not having a say' was the most significant cause of discontent expressed by children. Significant barriers to providing children with the opportunity to have their say included an unawareness of the rights of the child among teachers, as well as a lack of an understanding as to what genuine participation meant. Various frameworks have been suggested to support the active participation and consultation of children in their learning and school environments.

One well-known model has been proposed by Lundy (2007). This model or framework sets out to ensure that children are not just listened to but that due weight is given to their voice in line with Article 12, mentioned above. There are four components: Space, Voice, Audience and Influence.

Space: this refers to the opportunity that children are given to express their views and opinions in a safe environment.

Voice: this refers to the fact that children are entitled to express their views, and this right 'is not dependent on their capacity to express a mature view'.

Audience: to ensure that children's voices are given 'due weight' their views must be actively listened to: this being the audience.

Influence: Lundy's approach suggests that it is not enough to be listened to but that children's voices must have some influence.

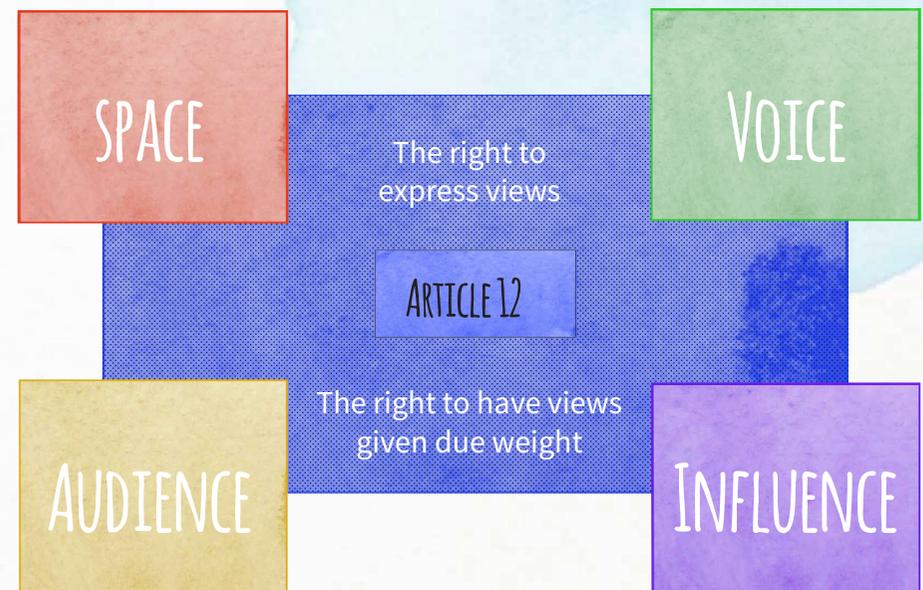
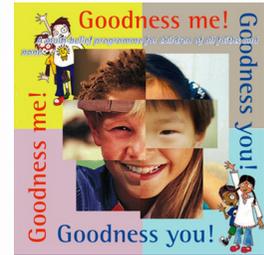


Figure 1: Lundy's Model of Participation (taken from National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020, Department of Children and Youth Affairs).

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WHAT IS TOKENISM?

While similar to Lundy's model Paula Flynn (2013) suggests another, final step to the process. It suggests revisiting the discussion with the children in order to talk to them about the impact or influence that their voices have had. This allows for the opportunity to review the impact or progress that has been made on the discussion and highlight further opportunities or possibilities. Children are thereby informed regarding the influence that their views and opinions have on their environment and reassured that they are listened to. This ensures that children have been listened to in an authentic way.

A key danger highlighted by many researchers in this space relates to tokenistic listening. For example, student councils can sometimes be understood as tokenistic. Students don't always feel themselves to be fully represented by these councils. Neither do they always believe them to be a democratic means of expressing their views or bringing about change (Alderson, 2000; Flynn, 2013). It has also been highlighted that it is easy for adults to comply with outward signs of listening to children, but ultimately to ignore their views. According to Lundy (2007) such practice is not only in breach of Article 12 but can be counter-productive. Therefore, to combat tokenism teachers are encouraged to listen authentically to children (Flynn, 2013). Authentic listening does not imply that teachers act on every wish that children may have but rather that they listen to what it is that children have to say and respond appropriately. Children need to believe that they are being listened to. Giving children the opportunity to express their views and responding authentically to these views and opinions improves

children's experience of school and increases their sense of ownership of their environment.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF CHILD VOICE FOR LEARNING?

Child voice is primarily rooted in a rights perspective. However, a significant body of research suggests that such an approach has benefits that extend beyond the field of rights. Research in this area has demonstrated benefits to children's learning. It indicates that children who feel their voices are listened to and taken into consideration demonstrate greater engagement in their own learning (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Research also suggests that children's participation in decision-making that extends beyond their immediate learning to the wider classroom and school contexts promotes a greater sense of ownership and responsibility (Flynn, 2013). Further benefits to this sense of shared ownership include improved teacher-pupil relationships (Davies, 2005; Tangen, 2009). Improvement in teacher-pupil relationships and classroom climate have advantages for children's social and emotional development, influencing pupil self-image and wellbeing (Smyth, 2015).

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CURRICULUM AND METHODOLOGIES

Consistent with arguments for children's rights and student voice are notions and practices of curriculum and pedagogy that afford children and young people an active role, honouring their rights and preparing them for respectful participation in the larger society. (Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016)

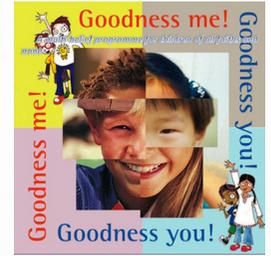
It is notable that many of the curricular approaches and developments in primary education in Ireland support practices that are consistent with child voice. The Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 1999) promotes a child-centred and holistic vision of learning in which children are considered agents in the construction of their own knowledge. Such an understanding of learning adds to a vision of the child as being intrinsically involved in making decisions about their own learning.

While consistent with the vision underpinning the curriculum, child voice has a specific resonance with the aims of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) which seeks to 'to develop in the child a sense of social responsibility, a commitment to active and participative citizenship and an appreciation of the democratic way of life'. This commitment to citizenship is evident in the strand unit Developing citizenship. In the early years, the child-led practices promoted in Aistear: the Early Childhood Framework (NCCA, 2009) support children's decision-making in their own learning environments. Indeed, children as citizens is one of the guiding principles of the Framework.



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Such curricular approaches encourage teachers to act as facilitators providing children with the opportunity to have a greater say in their learning; by listening authentically and responding appropriately to children's opinions. Activities such as class debates, discussions, circle-time, philosophy 4 children, child-led projects, inquiry-based learning and formative-assessment lend themselves to child voice, as they create space for children not only to express their opinions, but to have ownership of their own learning. Therefore, central to child voice is the relationship between teacher and pupil. This is a relationship based on mutual respect and reciprocal and continued dialogue, in which the teacher places trust in their pupils and recognises the classroom as a shared space.

CHILD VOICE IN THE GMGY CURRICULUM AND ITS METHODOLOGIES

Child voice is a core principle of the GMGY Guiding Principles. I live my childhood in my family, community and country. All are important to me. I want to learn how to participate and contribute. Help me to understand my traditions and something of the tradition of others, and help others to understand something of mine. I need to learn how to talk about, ask questions of, listen to and appreciate what people value and believe. (NCCA, 2017)

Children are enabled to voice their values, beliefs and life experiences through the GMGY curriculum.

The methodologies employed in GMGY enable children to express themselves in a safe and respectful environment within their classroom. Teachers promote active and respectful listening. In the strands of Thinking time and Beliefs and religions, the teacher acts as a facilitator for much of the lesson in order to allow children to have an opportunity to express themselves. Opportunities for children to discuss new learning is a key feature of all GMGY lessons.

Research by Fasas et al. (in press) pertaining to child voice in the Community National Schools found that: Teachers often facilitated discussions of religious events and festivals with children providing their own experiences on the topics. While respect and a sense of inclusion may be brought in from home, the schools can be seen as sites for intercultural dialogue and contact. Most children in all community national schools enjoyed this approach and learning new things from their classmates.

Children are encouraged to learn about and from each other and by promoting this type of learning GMGY enables children to shape their learning experiences.

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