

## Title: Researching participative rights in younger children's education: Policy, practice and children's experiences

Blurb: Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, researchers at four universities\* are collaborating over a three-year period to consider how current legislation, policy, and teacher education support the enactment of children's participative rights within schools for five to seven year-old children in Wales. We are also working directly with children, teachers, teacher educators and student teachers to consider their understandings and experiences of children's participative rights.

Authors: Louisa M Roberts (Research Associate, UWE) & Dr Sarah Chicken (Associate Professor of Childhood and Social Justice, UWE)

The implementation of the Curriculum for Wales (2021) represents a time of unprecedented change for Welsh education. Our analysis of legislation and Welsh education policy over the last 20 years shows that the Welsh Government's commitment to the UNCRC has been maintained through practice-facing curriculum guidance despite inconsistencies around children's participative rights in the formal policy documentation. The Curriculum for Wales (2021) builds on this commitment by allowing schools flexibility and ownership of their curriculum development, whilst also stipulating that curriculum development must be underpinned by the [United Nations framework of Human Rights Education \(2011\)](#). This means schools must now ensure their curriculum reflects all three elements of the framework, and includes education about, through and for human rights. This is a progressive stance and places Wales more at the forefront of children's rights education.

However, the way in which education policy translates into practice and shapes children's lived experiences is complex. Our project looks at some of the critical points in that policy implementation journey, including:

- ❖ Initial Teacher Education (ITE) provision and Continuing Professional Learning and Development (CPLD) opportunities for teachers and educators,
- ❖ In-service teachers' understandings of children's participative rights and how they can be supported in their classrooms,
- ❖ Young children's understandings of their rights and their experiences of participation.

Our survey of ITE programmes in Wales suggests an inconsistent picture, with only two of the nine programmes included in the survey having children's rights explicitly included in programme aims and learning outcomes. However, on a modular level twenty-four modules were seen to include children's participative, within which there is a focus on knowledge of the UNCRC and pedagogical practices that support children's participative rights.

The current phase of our project involves collaborating with teachers of children aged 3-7 years in nursery to year two classes in English and Welsh medium schools across Wales. Through creative and innovative workshops, the teachers are exploring understandings of children's participative rights, and surfacing the barriers and enablers which might exist to these rights being enacted in classroom practice. Reggio Emilia pedagogy is being used to provoke reflections on how children's participative rights can exist in Welsh classrooms.

In the next exciting stage of the research, the teachers will carry out classroom projects to explore both children's understandings of their participative rights, and the pedagogical approaches that might support the enactment of these participative rights. The teachers will be sharing their projects with each other and through our networks.

Most importantly, our research team will be engaging with the children directly to hear their thoughts and feelings about the projects they are involved with. In this way the views of the young children themselves can be foregrounded in our research findings and can be fed-back to policy-makers and educators across Wales.

Our Children's Advisory Board (CAB) reflects a child rights-based Lundy model of research participation (Lundy, 2007) and is helping to orientate data generation with the children. Children's voices are being explored and amplified through multiple media and we are ensuring that the audiences we disseminate our findings to have the necessary influence to improve the enactment of young children's participative rights in classrooms in Wales. We will ensure we are addressing issues with the CAB that we are able to act upon, and we will provide clear feedback through a 'you said and we responded' model.

Our final phase of the project takes forward the experiences of all of the teacher and child participants to explore how teacher educators can support new teachers to develop participative pedagogies. The aim is to identify enablers and barriers in initial teacher education so that teachers entering the profession support the enactment of young children's participative rights from the very start of their careers.

Throughout our research we will be sharing findings, reflections, ideas and relevant resources through many different channels including our [website](#), [X-Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#). Anyone interested in staying up to date or getting involved with our project can also join our [Community of Practice Network](#). Thanks also go to our academic and [Professional Advisory Group](#) who are critical friends to the project and continue to give us the benefit of their time, knowledge and expertise.

We aim to share our work as widely as possible with policy-makers and education practitioners so that the participative rights of the youngest primary school children in Wales can be fully and meaningfully realised.

*\*University of the West of England, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Swansea University and University of Wales Trinity Saint David*

## References

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*, 33(6), pp.927-942.

For more information visit <https://childrens-participation.org/> or email [child.participation@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:child.participation@uwe.ac.uk)