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Children's Knowledge about their Rights & Rights Education to Access Justice

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OUR MEMBERS

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- Scouting Ireland
- School of Education UCD
- Sexual Violence Centre Cork
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- Simon Communities of Ireland
- Social Care Ireland
- Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- SPHE Network
- SpunOut.ie
- St. Nicholas Montessori College
- St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association
- St. Patrick's Mental Health Services
- TASC
- Teachers' Union of Ireland
- Terenure College Rugby Football Club
- Transgender Equality Network Ireland
- The Anne Sullivan Foundation
- The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
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- Traveller Visibility Group Ltd
- Treoir
- UNICEF Ireland
- Women's Aid
- Youngballymun
- Young Social Innovators
- Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)
- Youth Work Ireland

THE AUTHORS



The Children's Rights Alliance

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Tanya Ward, Chief Executive of the Children's Rights Alliance

As we emerge out of a two-year long pandemic, we are beginning to reflect and understand the significance of that experience for children and young people in Ireland and across the world. One key lesson that is shining through is the critical importance of considering the best interest of the child and listening to children and young people. This is not simply adding children's issues to the agenda, but to ensure that we open the debate and dialogue on the most pressing social issues of our time and include, encourage and listen to children and young people in that discussion.

Youth participation needs to become central to what we do at a societal and political level.

It is young people themselves who have the best insight into the issues most affecting them, and they have innovative solutions on how to address them. This report is a great example of that. In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted the general lack of awareness about children's rights in Ireland. Without knowledge of their rights and education to empower them to exercise those rights, children's access to justice is negatively impacted. The Children's Rights Alliance commissioned this research to establish a baseline of what children know about their rights and determine what methods are most effective to inform and educate them about their rights.

The young researchers involved in this report took on the challenge expertly, co-designing the methodology and taking part in conducting the research and data analysis. The findings presented will therefore be hugely valuable to human rights bodies, the Government and community/voluntary sector and will help inform required law reform, policy changes and programme investments.

The research revealed that the members of the Youth Advisory Panel had already established ideas and an understanding of what children's rights are, emphasising some of the key principles of children's rights including non-discrimination and equal treatment, special protection and care, and the right to express their views and identity.

The youth researchers identified rights of particular importance to them including the right to education, health, participation in decision-making and their right to access services and supports for disabilities.

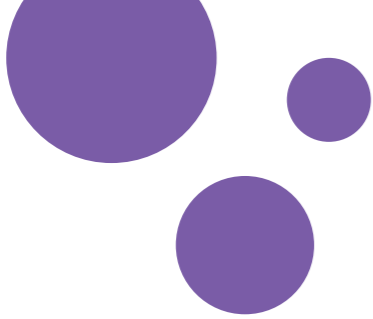
The youth panel also demonstrated a unique understanding of the complexity of violations and breaches of rights how for many children and how the intersection of violations and issues can make them particularly vulnerable. This was explicitly discussed in terms of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity and disabilities.

The report found that the perceived lack of knowledge of children's rights is not the core problem. As the researchers suggest, the children experiencing the most discrimination are often acutely aware of their rights. Rather, it is the lack of enforcement of children's rights, and other people's attitudes towards them, that is the root of the deeper structural challenges outlined in the research. The recommendations point to what type of information children need

about their rights and what type of children's rights education is needed in Ireland. We also need to look at how children and young people can be better supported to exercise their rights and take action when their rights are not respected. Voice, Rights, Action – when we look at what response is needed in how children access information about their rights and children's rights education, all three aspects need to be considered.

Children and young people need to be provided with information on their rights in an engaging way, that explains and details what rights they have but importantly, how to protect them and exercise them in the different systems in society from the healthcare system to the justice system. Identified as a critical focal point for children and young people to develop an understanding of their rights, schools should provide mandatory and comprehensive education on children's rights. This education should go beyond the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and should include information on remedies and supports are available to children and young people when their rights are not respected.





The recommendations also propose that educators and adults working with children should undergo children’s rights education and ensure they implement the learnings in their work. Training on topics related to children’s rights could foster an understanding of children’s rights and help ensure that support services are more accessible for children and young people, in particular psychological, social, legal, educational and medical services.

The report also highlights the innate sense of social justice that young people have for their peers, particularly those facing many challenges and more discrimination than others. Young people recognise the need for services to respond to the particular needs of vulnerable children and they want to special protections put in place for vulnerable groups for example providing adequate spaces (like gender neutral toilets and changing rooms, school facilities and infrastructure accessible for children with disabilities) along with policies for participation and school accountability. This should be considered when updating the National Bullying Strategy.

The issues faced by children and young people - the breaches of children’s rights explored through this research - are the result of policy decisions and investments that have shaped the systems in Irish society. They will not all be solved through education and information on children’s rights in isolation. However, as one young person expressed, children’s rights education can be an opportunity for “learning to learn”. With the findings of this research report, we can think critically and creatively about how we provide information and education on children’s rights

and how we encourage and amplify young people’s voice in that process. Ensuring this is not a task that is assigned to adults alone. The youth researchers consider children and young people to be active participants in this reform, resulting in recommendations such as lowering the voting age to 16.

This year, Ireland will once again be examined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and

This report is a timely message to those of us in the community and voluntary sector as well as those in Government; Now is the time to give children and young people a true voice in our political system and lower the voting age to 16.

Children and young people’s desire to use their voice and take action to protect their rights is something that should be supported by decision-makers. This report demonstrates just how capable young people are in engaging in topical debates and developing solutions. It is our turn to listen.

Tanya Ward
Chief Executive, Children’s Rights Alliance



1. INTRODUCTION



Children's rights, as established in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), establish clear and concrete commitments from the governments towards children. This international convention has been ratified by 192 countries, including Ireland, establishes that every child – understood as every person under the age of 18 – has specific rights to guarantee the protections and care needed. Some of the specific rights include to ensure that children are not discriminated against (UNCRC article 2), that their best interests are a primary concern in all actions (UNCRC article 3), that they're views are heard in all the decisions made on issues that concern them (UNCRC article 12), and that they receive special protection and assistance to guarantee their survival and development (UNCRC article 6).

Also in the UNCRC, is children's right to know about their rights (UNCRC article 42) and to receive an education that allows them to develop a respect for rights and fundamental freedoms (UNCRC article 29). Without relevant and meaningful ways to access information on their rights and Children's Rights Education (CRE), children are not be able to claim their rights, jeopardising their access to basic services such as health, education and the justice system or their capacity to claim the special protections and care needed. Therefore, when looking at the responsibilities towards children's

rights by governments in general and adults in particular, it is imperative to analyse the existing information and educational provisions that guarantee children can uphold their rights and the rights of others. The breadth and depth of CRE provisions should include the development of knowledge and understanding of rights, the empowerment to protect and promote rights as well as having educational experiences that respect children's rights (Mallon & Martinez Sainz, 2021).

CRE assumes not only that children are rights holders, but also that education is an enabling right through which "children develop the understanding and capacity to access other rights" (Jerome & Starkey, 2021). In particular, CRE is key to guarantee children have the necessary knowledge and skills to protect their rights in the different contexts of their everyday lives. The learning enabled by CRE will be important for children, their parents, guardians or carers, to access justice effectively in case their rights are not respected.

Thus, a thorough and meaningful provision of CRE becomes an essential element for policies, services and practices aimed at the promotion and protection of children's rights. Such provision of CRE, in order to be thorough and meaningful, must be contextualised and developed from children's own understandings and lived experiences (Martinez Sainz 2018). This is the frame of CRE used to develop the research presented in this report.

This report presents the findings of a participatory research project with a Youth Advisory Panel in Ireland designed to better understand children's knowledge of their own rights, identify gaps in their knowledge and skills, and to develop recommendations that will help to address those gaps in CRE through policy and practice. The project was commissioned by the Children's Rights Alliance and undertaken by researchers from the School of Education, University College Dublin.



2. METHODOLOGY



2.1 Youth Advisory Panel: children as co-researchers

This project was conducted in partnership with a Youth Advisory Panel composed of seven participants between 12 and 17 years of age. In June 2021, the Children's Rights Alliance launched a call for expressions of interest open to all its member organisations, inviting children who were already participating in their projects or programmes to join this research. The criteria to take part included being under 18 years old and having an interest in sharing their knowledge about children's rights in Ireland. All children who expressed interest matched the criteria and therefore were invited to join the study, but one decided to not participate due to overriding commitments.

The young people assumed the role of co-researchers along with the adult investigators, participating in the process of gathering information, data interpretation and analysis, and will also take part in the dissemination of the findings. According to Punch (2002) participatory research methods "not only provide opportunities for children to express themselves but are also a potential source for empowering them for a fuller participation in society and for decision-making in matters which affect them". Beyond that, children and young people should be included as active participants in research for ethical reasons – and in this particular research for coherence reasons, as its central topic is precisely children's knowledge of their own rights.

Children's right to participate in society is recognised internationally as a fundamental human right. The UNCRC (article 12) calls for children to have the right to be consulted on issues that concern them, guaranteeing their "right to co-determine what questions are being asked, what usages are being counted, and which opinions are being tested for agreement and disagreement" (Kleine et al 2016). Thus, to critically reflect children's role in research also means to think about the choices of methods and their application (Punch, 2002).

Children also have valuable insights into the requirements of CRE. In order to be effective in helping them to protect their own rights and the rights of others, the investigators worked with the Youth Advisory Panel to understand what they know about their rights but also considered their views, concerns and recommendations on what type of CRE (Jerome, 2016) is needed for the fulfilment of the commitments established in the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020).

2.2 Reimagining Freire's 'culture circles' for Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

The research design of the study is informed by Freire's (1970/2005) key concepts of problem-posing education, codifications and praxis and adapts his proposal of culture circles to engage

young people in research about their rights. Culture circles have been previously used in research with young people (Humphries, 2019; Monteiro et al. 2015) as these circles create meaningful spaces for individuals to interrogate reality, express their levels of awareness about the problems that impact them and, through dialogue and discussion, develop a critical stance towards reality and possible solutions. The culture circles designed for this project retain some of the main characteristics proposed by Freire (1970/2005) as dialogical spaces in which individual experiences are central to develop collective understanding of reality, spaces with horizontal relationships in which everyone is encouraged to teach and everyone learns from each other. In culture circles, participants identify the problems affecting them through 'codifications' (Freire, 1970/2005) - artefacts or materials - that will prompt a critical dialogue that will develop into collective understandings and solutions to overcome the identified problems. However, unlike Freire's proposal, the culture circles in this project were fully digital with a combination of asynchronous and synchronous dialogue through digital channels. Reimagining the culture circle in a digital format made it possible to create a participatory research space for participants to engage as co-researchers.

This research was conducted fully remotely between mid-August and mid-November 2021. Once per week over a nine-week period, the young people joined a 'culture circle' via Zoom meeting, facilitated by two adult researchers. When using the principles of participatory action research, the role of the adult researchers is redefined and they become active listeners rather than authoritative figures (Farmer and Cepin, 2017, p. 311). Acknowledging that, the adult researchers were actively involved in the dialogues, acting as facilitators rather than guiding the discussion.

The first 'culture circle' consisted of an open conversation about children's rights in Ireland and the presentation of the research objectives and methodology. The Youth Advisory Panel agreed on what components would be kept or changed and expressed what methods of data collection they would like to use. Each of the seven following 'culture circles' had a central theme considering the focus of the research as defined in the Terms of Reference, namely: children's participation rights; children on the move; children in care; LGBTQIA+ children; children in conflict with the law; and children with disabilities. In the last two 'culture circles', the group reflected on the data collected using a tree of opportunities and prepared recommendations on how different actors can support children in exercising their rights.



Figure 1 : 'Culture circles' timeline



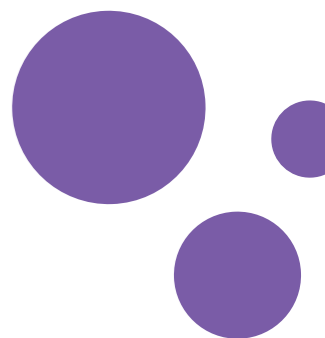
A new 'culture circle' was initiated every week, sharing basic concepts with the youth researchers about the theme to be discussed as well as prompt questions to encourage them to generate data. A child-friendly website was developed to make it easier for them to access the content. After going through the content, they undertook their own research using different methods of data collection.

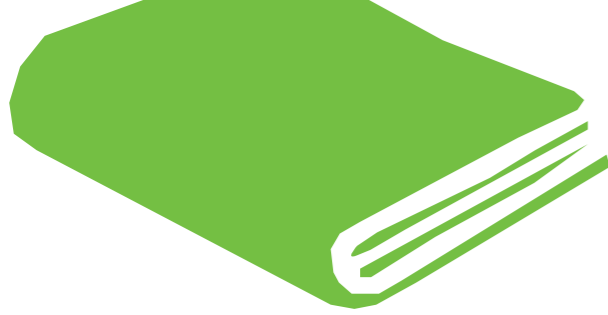
Farmer and Cepin (2017, p. 309) advocate that "if creative methods offer some potential to provide children and young people with more control over the research process [...] then ethically and methodologically these methods should be explored". With that in mind, the young researchers were introduced to the following research methods. The breakdown of 'culture circles' and corresponding methods are shown in Annex I.

- Research using technology, including sound-elicitation, content analysis of social media, news and movies, as well as using digital platforms such as Padlet and Miro to organise the data generated;
- Arts-based methods including mapping, writing and creating collages;
- Community methods for data collection including interviews and observations at their homes, schools or neighbourhoods.

In previous research conducted by Darbyshire et al. (2005), the use of "multiple methods increased children's opportunity to choose and have at least partial control about how to contribute and what to say, and helped engage and interest them while demonstrating that we (the adults) recognized them as active agents in the creation of their worlds.

"Indeed, we observed that the methodology used allowed the creation of multiple spaces of action and reflection. Firstly, the Zoom meetings were spaces where the youth researchers could reflect on the data generated as well as engage in dialogues with their peers, learning from one another's experiences. Secondly, they had the chance to discuss the themes with family members, friends and in some cases, even with service providers. Finally, the digital spaces used by the young people as platforms to organise the data generated also represented spaces of reflection, where they could make sense of all the work undertaken.





2.3 Data analysis

The following steps were undertaken to analyse the data:

1. the meetings' recordings were carefully transcribed and the data generated by the Youth Advisory Panel (stories, collages, interviews, etc.) were anonymised;
2. an inductive thematic framework for coding the data was developed by the adult researchers based on key themes identified on the data;
3. a child-friendly version of the coding framework (Annex II) was presented to the young researchers for them to give their comments and feedback, reinforcing their status as co-researchers and acknowledging the benefits of children's input into the data analysis (Gillett-Swan, 2018);
4. the data sets were coded by both adult researchers independently with the support of the softwares MAXQDA and Atlas.ti, and then cross-checked and moderated to ensure consistency in the coding as a way to increase the reliability of the coding process and the rigour of the findings.



2.4 Ethical considerations

Before kicking off, the research design was fully approved by the University College Dublin Office of Research Ethics. It also followed the general UNICEF guidelines on Ethical Research Involving Children Guidance (ERIC) and its Ethical Charter (Graham et al, 2013). The two investigators were fully Garda vetted to conduct research with children. All the participants signed assent forms and were only contacted by the researchers once their guardians signed and submitted ethics approved consent forms to the Children's Rights Alliance.



3. FINDINGS

3.1 Children's knowledge of rights

Members of the Youth Advisory Panel had already established ideas of what children's rights are at the start of the study. In individual videos they recorded before the 'culture circles' began, each member articulated their own definition of children's rights and what these rights entailed. Their responses emphasised some of the key principles of children's rights including non-discrimination and equal treatment, special protection and care, and their entitlement to express their views and identity.

Children's rights mean...

"We have to be treated in the same way."

"We can be whoever we want to be."

"We can get the care and protection we need."

"We have a voice now so we should use it."

"We do have views on serious stuff as well!"

The Youth Panel also identified specific rights that are particularly important for them as children, including the right to education, health, participation in decision-making and their right to access services and supports for disabilities. As a result of the dialogue during the first 'culture circle', the youth panel drew a distinction between 'basic' and 'practical' knowledge of children's rights. For them, the basic knowledge included awareness of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and an understanding that children have specific rights to secure their survival – eg. food and shelter. In contrast, they referred to a 'practical knowledge' of rights that relates to their capacity to apply their knowledge of rights in real life and act when their rights are being violated. They recognised that both types of knowledge were necessary and had implications for their everyday lives:

"It makes your life easier if you knew them [your rights]."



Children's knowledge of rights also reflected their awareness of the complexity of violations and breaches of rights, in particular, how specific aspects can combine in a child's life making them more vulnerable. The acknowledgement of the intersectional nature of violations and breaches of rights was explicitly discussed in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity and disabilities; thus participants argued that some children - for example girls, Trans children, children with low socio-economic background, with disabilities, Travellers, etc.- are more vulnerable to be disregarded not only for their age but also for these other aspects and conditions.

The acknowledgement of the intersectionality of breaches of children's rights facilitated the discussion of particular challenges that different groups of children face. Throughout the 'culture circles' the panel identified how the children in vulnerable groups are at most risk and the complex ways in which they are prevented from fully enjoying their rights. Among the groups of children that the young researchers identified are more vulnerable and at risk of not being able to fully exercise their rights are:

- Children in foster and residential care
- Children from the Traveller community
- Migrant and refugee children
- Children suffering from mental health issues
- LGBTQIA + children
- Children part of the Garda Juvenile Diversion programme

For the young researchers, these children experience significant discrimination, prejudice and exclusion on a daily basis. They explained that the problem is not a lack of knowledge of rights, they believe that most of the affected children are aware of them. The problem is the lack of enforcement of children rights, other people's attitudes towards them and deeper structural challenges, as one of the researchers explained:

“Xenophobia, racism, that sort of like generalisation in general really does have an effect. [...] I don't know much except from documentaries, but what I've been exposed to is very negative.”

While the youth panel recognised that children from these groups are generally more at risk, they acknowledged that much more information would be needed for them and other children, including those who are part of these groups, to better exercise their rights, claim if these are not respected and access justice. As an example, one child mentioned knowing very little about the Irish Youth Justice Service, referring to this lack of knowledge as a 'black hole':

“I think parents should even want to know what their kids are allowed to do and promote that for their own kids, but in Ireland, definitely there's not enough information. I've never heard of any, you know, the Minister for Children [talking about children in] conflict with the law, or an organisation or something. What happens [with these children] is just a complete black hole.”

3.2 Adults' knowledge of children's rights

In the 'culture circles', the Youth Panel identified gaps in adults' knowledge of children's rights that result in a lack of support for children in the realisation of their rights. Participants noted more information and supports for adults are needed so they can develop a greater understanding of children's rights. With better knowledge of children's rights, adults can then build their capacity to protect these rights and are better equipped to assist children in their promotion and protection where and when needed. They argued that more guidance is needed across their different spaces including schools, communities and families, so children know where and how to ask for help:

“I think that schools need to have the information for students who are coming, even if they're just from the other side of the country, just new students and you need to

adjust. [...] There shouldn't be children going all their way to research, all this stuff should just be easily accessible and known about.”

Support from parents and other adults seemed to be extremely important to the young researchers, especially in cases where they need help navigating systems – such as the health system – and when they need someone to stand up for their rights, particularly in situations where they are not heard. During the 'culture circles', the investigators observed that most of the children were fully supported by their parents or other adults in the research process. Comments such as *“then I was discussing with my parents about these recommendations [...]”* and *“my parents helped...”* were very common throughout the study.

3.3 Children's Rights Education

The Youth Panel had concrete ideas of what Children's Rights Education (CRE) should encompass and about what should be the focus when teaching and learning about rights. In particular, they considered it necessary for children to learn about their rights beyond the content of the UNCRC, and to develop more complex knowledge and skills that would allow them to promote these rights widely and to take actions when these are not respected.

“[What we need to learn is] How to get the message out of what rights we have and how to ‘use’ them.”

“What I learned was the UN Convention on the Rights of [the Child is] absolutely fantastic, but again, these are basic rights, like basic needs of the child. I don’t understand why I need to be taught that I need to be fed three times a day, I need to go on walks and make sure that I have a space to play... I know that, you know? We’re like, we’re in Ireland, we should actually be taught more about that and how we should actually stand up for things when it isn’t that black and white, and it isn’t back here.”



Participants also mentioned that, in some instances, they feel that the teachers are not fully prepared to teach about rights, at least not with the depth that children would like this topic to be taught. They believe that a different approach is needed to teach children’s rights, one that promotes critical thinking about these rights but also about how these are experienced by children and stimulates a debate based on those experiences. Participants argued that children’s rights education is often part of broader subjects in schools such as CSPE (Civic, Social and Political Education) that might not specifically address contemporary and contextual issues on human rights. They agreed that schools provide basic information about children’s rights - for example the UNCRC-; however, children’s rights are not mandatory content in schools and depend largely on the interest of individual teachers in the subject. For this reason, it would be difficult to assess the general knowledge of children in Ireland about their rights. For example, members of the Youth Panel developed their own knowledge of rights largely outside schools, through civic engagement and work with civil society organisations.

In several discussions, the Youth Panel highlighted the need for this complex and contextualised approach to CRE. For them, such an approach would require teachers and other adults working with children to be trained on human and children’s rights, to be aware of current barriers for their full exercise and challenges relevant to the everyday lives

of children. According to the participants this will allow adults to support them better when their rights are not respected but also teach the content in a way that is challenging and in a way they feel will make a difference in their lives.

“Sometimes CSPE is the class that we learn about it and it’s not an exam class, so sometimes it’s kind of an easier class for a teacher to pick up as their second subject and it’s crystal clear to students that they know or don’t know what they’re talking about, or if they can actually answer a question if you form something in your brain, like curiosity... It’s quite obvious if they don’t know their stuff which is disheartening because you’d imagine someone who’s teaching you something should have, like, excitement about letting the youth know about what they have!”



The importance of considering real-life experiences of children when planning to teach about rights was also highlighted by the young researchers. They agreed that their lived experiences are often disregarded by adults, resulting in classes for example that do not fit their knowledge gaps and instead, they are taught about topics that they already know or that do not address their actual interests or needs. An example that came up in the discussion was sex education at schools, in which as participants explained, gender and sexual diversity are not addressed at all:

“I find it very disgusting that school can teach sex education and not have anything to do with gender or sexual orientations. That’s just disgusting because you’re teaching the class, you can obviously, especially as a teacher, you could probably pinpoint a couple of the students personally, that you believe might be a part of that community. And to just deny them their direct access to sex education, isn’t that like a right or something?! It should be anyways, because it’s such an important thing for a human in general.”

Overall, the youth panel demonstrated to be quite knowledgeable about children’s rights and aware of social inequalities. Although there were gaps in their knowledge about children’s rights, most of the time they could identify those gaps, make sense of why they existed and think about possible solutions to address them. It is important to consider that, as explained in the methodology section, participants in the study were recruited via the network organisations of the Children’s Rights Alliance. As a consequence, all the participating children were individuals already involved with organisations working on several children’s rights issues which might not reflect the overall population under 18 of the country. However, their familiarity with children’s rights also translated into well-informed ideas and suggestions about what CRE should encompass and they had clear ideas of how they would like to be taught.

3.4 Spaces for learning and participation

In preparation for the ‘culture circle’ on children’s participation rights, the young researchers were invited to make a collage showing which are the spaces where they feel that they can participate in. These collages were shared among the co-researchers and collectively analysed, in addition to these artefacts, the young researchers also conducted interviews with friends and peers to address the questions regarding child participation.



Fig.1 Source: collage made by one young researcher

Figure 1 shows one of these collages, with representations that coincide with the spaces identified in the discussion: their schools and classrooms, their homes, and those spaces where they interact with friends and peers. In particular, the co-researcher that created the collage highlighted the importance of feeling comfortable in these spaces as a requirement for their participation. The collage also depicts a common element of child participation similarly expressed by the young researchers in the discussion, and that is the refusal by adults to listen to children and actually notice when they voice concerns, views or opinions. In the collage, this refusal is represented by the man shutting his ears.

Spaces for learning and participation were indeed recurrently discussed throughout the ‘culture circles’. The young researchers had clear ideas of what makes a good space for participation and which are the spaces where they feel most encouraged to learn about their rights. The common features of these spaces included a positive atmosphere in which the power imbalance between adults and children is less pronounced and a safe environment where children can express their views and are effectively listened to.

“I would definitely say home because I always feel that I’m listened to at home.”

“I interviewed my cousin about where she felt that she was heard. She said a few places, one of them was her classes. She felt that the atmosphere there was good, that the teachers listened to what she said and actually tried to see if they could help.”

The participants drew connections between the spaces they can participate fully or partially and the spaces where they learn about their rights, including their right to being heard in matters that affect them. For example, school was identified as the most important spaces for learning but also as a space where the youth panel and other children they interviewed felt they could participate. As they spend a significant amount of their everyday lives in school, their perception is that these spaces in particular should further stimulates both their participation and learning process:





“I think yeah school is the best place [to learn about rights] because, we’re told all the time, school is meant to be a basic priority, it’s your main focus. So it should also be, you know, your main support, if you’re gonna spend so many hours of your day there.”

The overlap between participation and learning of rights was present in other spaces, as the participants highlighted learning from friends, from family members and eventually from the experiences they shared in the ‘culture circles’. While they considered the school as one of the most important spaces for learning, their perception is that they also learn from each other, from family members, as well as from their own experiences. From the observation and the discussion, it was evident that, for children, the process of learning about their rights and participating in these spaces seemed to be intertwined. This emphasised the importance of the environment in which CRE takes place, as the following excerpt from one of the interviews conducted by the young researchers shows:



“Cause I’m in 6th class my Múinteoir [teacher] asks us about things like what new books we should be getting to update our library for ‘drop everything and read’ time. My class are also in charge of playing with the younger kids every Wednesday, this is where we have space to share our ideas like a game or tell them things like what not to do like lying or speaking English [she goes to a gaelscoil].”

— (11 year old girl, not a member of the youth panel).

The young researchers noted that they can better learn in spaces where they are encouraged to think, reflect and speak. For example, they discussed how they felt more confident participating in spaces where there are other people in the same age group and where they can talk about things that they care about.

“It’s a lot easier [to talk] with my friends or anyone in my age group.”

“I honestly feel that I am more heard by people in my own age group as well.”

In one of the ‘culture circles’, the young researchers established a relationship between being well educated about rights and feeling confident enough to participate in social spaces. They acknowledged the importance of CRE from an early age as means for children to be knowledgeable enough to stand up for their rights and the rights of others.

“I think some people feel that they’re not really educated enough to speak on something. I definitely think that schools need a lot more education [...] It’s very hard to feel confident in speaking up when you know what you’re talking about but I think it’s even harder if you feel like you’re out of your depth and people are talking about things that you’ve never heard of before.”

[...]Especially in primary school, there needs to be a big emphasis on talking about social issues, or even just like a small bit because it was like nothing in my school anyway.”

They could identify spaces where they and the children they interviewed felt comfortable participating. However, they also recognised the difference between spaces where their participation was meaningful and effective and those where children are not able to speak about matters that affect them or where they are not listened to, even when they raise their voice.



“I think participation is speaking about your views then trying to act about those views. Anybody can have views, but you have to try to act on them, if you want them to actually be carried out.”

“I remember in CSP we were doing like children’s rights and citizen rights and all of this. And I’m looking here and there’s no right to be listened to, at least not that I can find. There is the access to information, the respect to children’s views, and sharing thoughts freely, but never to be listened to. And I do think that that would be very, very important. Because being listened to myself has brought me to who I am now, you know, I’m able to do this, I’m able to speak freely, you know, because I know I’m listened to.”



3.5 Supports and provisions

The youth panel identified schools as important learning spaces for children’s rights, even though they did not always feel that they or their peers were fully supported in their learning process. The lack of support was particularly affecting children with additional learning needs:

“We’re all very high tech and can find anything online, but education is promoting learning, not just information absorbing and to me that’s what the right kind of education is: learning to learn, really.”

“Teachers should be trained in how to support their students that need support and should learn to spot indications of mental disorders/ disabilities in their students so that children don’t get left behind.”

In fact, the young researchers perceived that there are not enough provisions and resources for children with disabilities to respond to their specific needs. They noted that support services are not broadly offered, and the few options are only available for those who can afford it. Issues such as lack of access to wheelchairs, little participation in sports and delays in diagnosis results (i.e. autism) were mentioned by the Youth Panel as challenges that children with additional needs face to fully participate in schools due to poor support and provisions. One young person shared a lived experience of losing the sense of belonging as a result of the lack of access:

“Only some of us can access rights to play, leisure and culture. People don’t include us (children with disabilities). They leave us alone even when we are struggling.”





In the 'culture circles', children repeatedly raised issues related to mental health and additional educational needs. Drawing from their own experiences and the experiences from children close to them, they argue children are not taken seriously when they are struggling with mental health or psychological issues. They mentioned that children very often are refused the supports that they need -for example assessment to get a diagnosis- despite explicitly requesting them. Their main challenge in these cases is not a lack of knowledge of their rights, but the skills to do something when these are not respected. For example, children have clear ideas about the importance of mental health, they do not always know who to ask for help.

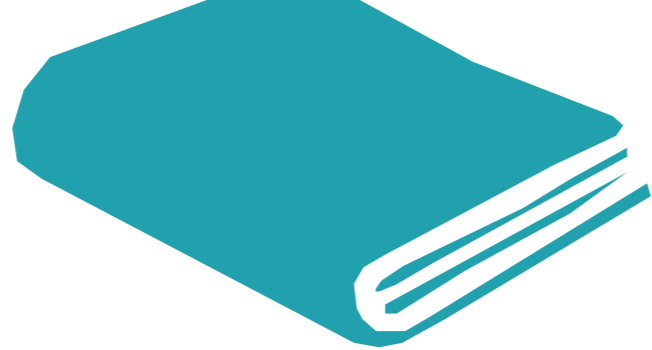
Long waiting times to access services and disproportionately expensive treatments were mentioned by the young researchers as difficulties that they face when trying to get the support they need. In addition, they recognised a lack of preventive actions that should be taken to guarantee their right to health, including mental health:

"It seems like prevention really needs to be emphasised. In schools, if somebody is struggling, what can we do to help them, can we find a reason why they're doing this, is there possibly a doctor that they need to see. That leads to so many issues and it doesn't just stop when they're 18 if they don't get that kind of support in their formative years [...] when children are young, not only teaching them about their rights but giving them the support they need."

As previously mentioned, the Youth Panel demonstrated awareness of the intersectional nature of violations of rights. Such intersection of vulnerabilities faced by certain children was discussed in several of the 'culture circles', in particular, how the different layers of vulnerability influence children's capacity to exercise and enjoy their rights.

"Especially for kids growing up now, it's been shown that mental illnesses and mental health problems are on the rise and there's absolutely nothing really being done to kind of help with that demand, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic. The budget was actually cut, and I do understand, you know, they needed to make more money for Covid patients and things like that, but children are suffering. And then there's also children whose parents don't believe in the whole mental health crisis or just aren't supportive, then it's gonna be really difficult for them to get help."





“Specifically for autism you’re supposed to get help from the school, but if you’re not diagnosed, you do not get that help. You’re just as autistic before you get a diagnosis, you know, like getting a diagnosis doesn’t mean it disappears. But it’s really hard and it’s all connected, you know, if you’re poor, well, not even poor, if you’re not rich, and you are a woman, a person of colour... you do not get diagnosed nearly as often.”

“There’s this idea that adults have the last say or that they know more and their opinions will be more valid than young people’s. I think to a certain point that it’s going to be true in terms of, you [the adults] have more experience, you’re probably intelligent in terms of life experience and everything. But this is kind of used to discredit young people like ‘oh they haven’t seen the world’ and this whole idea...”

3.6 Barriers to the realisation of children’s rights

In every ‘culture circle’, the Youth Panel identified several barriers they face for the realisation of their own rights. Among these barriers, issues related to lack of influence and not being taken seriously were repeatedly touched upon. One young researcher defined this phenomenon as “a vicious cycle of not being heard”, where adults’ opinions are more valued and respected than children’s.

The young researchers described situations where children’s experiences were completely discredited and only acknowledged once these were corroborated by an adult. These situations happened in different spaces such as schools (teachers not taking them seriously until parents intervened), health system (doctors not listening/talking to children about their own diagnosis and only paying attention to the parents, or perceived breaches of confidentiality by talking to the parents about confidential issues shared by children) and at home (adults simply saying “this is the answer because I said so, I am the adult”).

“The whole not being taken seriously because of your age... I have had multiple doctor appointments trying to figure out some weird twitch in my eye and the doctor told me that it was because I was spending too much time on my phone. I really thought ‘well, just because I’m 15 years old there’s nothing wrong with me, it’s because of my phone’. It seemed like a laugh actually.

Then we went to another doctor and Mom was the one explaining the thing and then it was some lack of magnesium issue, so the person actually went further into discussing what could be wrong than just minimising it to your screen time so yeah... living through experiences like that is really what make me want to come on to things like this and be like, let’s do our part!”





“Everything that a child has to say has to be reinforced by an adult. Kids can say stuff, but it still only matters when their parents say it.”

According to their perceptions, this is not only a matter of speaking or sharing their views but about the influence they have, that is, the actions taken afterwards as a result of them raising their voice. When asked how they would like these situations to be changed, they said that “even acknowledging that there is an issue or admitting that there is a problem can be a small step”. Acknowledgement and recognition of the value of children’s voice and participation concerns all adults, not only the ones in their immediate contexts:

“If a child wrote a letter to a politician, the politician might just pass it off as junk mail or ‘oh he’s just sending us a message for absolutely no reason let’s just throw it in the paper bin’ and I think that’s how the politicians think about children, whereas if it was maybe somebody who had just turned 18 they would

say ‘oh this person is a new person in our society, let’s listen to them’.”

Even when there are outlets specifically designed for children’s participation, these are not necessarily sufficient for them to have meaningful influence in the rules and matters affecting them. An example raised during the ‘culture circles’ was the Student Councils, which were defined as spaces where children should be able to speak about matters that concern them and have enough influence to inform decision-making on these matters or at least propose concrete changes needed:

“Technically the Student Council is kind of like this, you got to speak about what you think and how you think you could make the school, or in this case the world, better.”

However, the Youth Panel described experiences of ‘performative’ participation within Student Councils. They noted that the reputation of many councils could be described as ‘nothing ever happens there’. They described how in reality there is little room for inputs from students particularly in matters that they considered a priority for the realisation of their rights in schools such as rules and discipline, timetables, uniforms, mass attendance and other practical issues that affect children everyday life in schools.

“[The School Council] is not really about new rules with students or anything that can be changed about the way the school operates. That’s more like almost always up to the teachers, we’re not even really given an insight into what’s happening until it’s happened. [...] The School Council is meant to be input [from the students], but they’re not really given [that].”

“Any kind of expression, or any kind of freedom, I guess, from doing things exactly the way the school does is just kind of frowned upon and it just seems like the School Council is too scared to bring it up. [...] nothing happens, it’s just sitting in a room and listening to what’s happening next week in the school.”



4. RECOMMENDATIONS

This research prioritised the voices, perspectives and concerns of children, seeking to understand what type of Children's Rights Education is needed in Ireland and how they can be better supported to exercise their rights. The recommendations of the Youth Advisory Panel in the final 'culture circle' have informed and shaped the final recommendations for policy and practice.

Children's right to access information

- Children should be provided with information on their rights, how to better protect them and how these are exercised in different systems, for example the healthcare system, care system, justice system, and so on.
- Child-friendly tools and platforms should be developed to provide information on the implementation of children's rights and how children can access remedies when there is a breach of their rights.

Children's right to be heard and involved in decisions that impact them

- Lower the voting age to 16.
- Establish mechanisms and structures to consult with children and young people and ensure their voices are heard and that they

can influence decisions that impact them at home, in school and in the community. Politicians in particular should consult with and answer communications from children as people that they also represent.

- Adults working with children should undergo children rights education and ensure they implement the learnings in their work.

Children's right to equality

- Safe public environments should be provided that are respectful and inclusive of the rights of different groups of children, including children with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ children, migrant children, children in conflict with the law, children from the Traveller Community, children of all religions and none, and other minority groups.
- All schools, regardless of their ethos, should protect the rights of all children, including children with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ children, migrant children, children in conflict with the law, children from the Traveller Community and other minority groups.
- Special protections should be put in place for vulnerable groups of children. This should include providing adequate spaces (for example gender neutral toilets and changing rooms, school facilities and infrastructure accessible for children with disabilities) along with policies for participation and school accountability. This should be considered when updating the National Bullying Strategy.

Children's Rights Education

- Schools should provide mandatory and comprehensive education on children's rights. This education should go beyond the UN Convention on the Rights of the child and should include information on:
 - Remedies and options that are available to children and young people where their rights are not respected
 - The supports children and their families are entitled to.
- Teachers and other educators working with children and young people should be trained in how to support children and young people to promote and protect their rights.

Children's access to key services to exercise their rights

- Governments should invest more money in the implementation of children's rights, including psychological, social, legal, educational and medical services, and make those services accessible for children, in particular, mental health services.
- Governments and policy makers should explore how to design policies and protocols for children to access services, for example education services or health services, by themselves. This is particularly important for children with unsupportive parents,

guardians and carers; and for issues related to mental health, educational needs, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

- Service providers and adults responsible for children should be better trained on topics related to children's rights to ensure that support services are more accessible for children and young people, in particular psychological, social, legal, educational and medical services.

Children's right to access justice

- Programmes should be developed that respond to the particular needs of vulnerable children that understand how their rights are affected, for example, more programmes that place an emphasis on rehabilitation rather than punishment for children that are in conflict with the law, more supports for children in care, etc.
- Schools, families and communities should develop initiatives on preventing children and young people from ending up in conflict with the law (this applies especially to schools and the health system).
- Police officers, social workers, service providers and teachers should undergo implicit bias training to reduce racial profiling, bias against Travellers, people with disabilities and other minority groups.

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6. ANNEXES

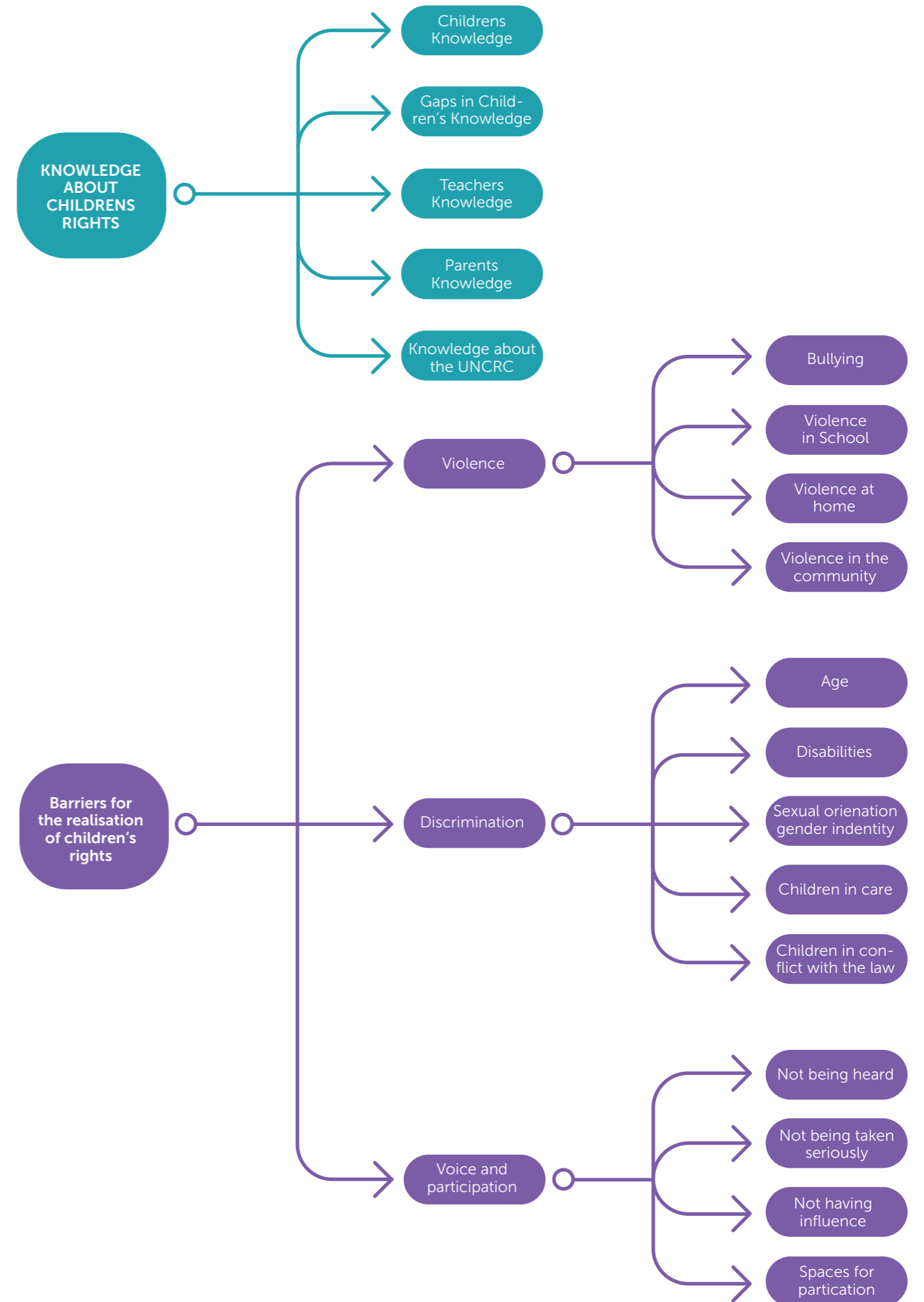
CULTURE CIRCLES THEMES	GUIDING QUESTIONS	METHOD	OUTPUTS
CC #1: Children’s rights + participatory research methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does children’s rights mean to you? How children’s rights are or are not present in your life? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record a video introducing yourself and saying what children’s rights mean to you. Use the shared Padlet to elaborate a bit more about your own experiences with children’s rights. We would love to know what you already know, what you would like to learn and if you had the chance to learn something new since you decided to join this research project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video recordings. Posts on a shared Padlet.
CC #2: Children’s participation rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the spaces where your voices and ideas are heard? What things would you like to be heard about by those making decisions? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interview a friend or a younger person asking about spaces they feel they are heard or where they would like to participate in. Take a couple of photos that illustrate these spaces and explain with a voice note or a short written piece what is on the photos. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interview written reports. Photos posted on private Padlets.
CC #3: Children on the move	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you know someone who immigrated or emigrated? What moves have this person made so far in her/his life? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interview a friend or family member who has an experience of migration and create a collage reflecting about the guiding questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital collages posted on private Padlets.

CULTURE CIRCLES THEMES	GUIDING QUESTIONS	METHOD	OUTPUTS
CC #4: Children in car	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you think that foster care is an alternative that respects children's rights? Which rights are the most vulnerable when a child is in care? What types of support could improve the situation of children in care? How other children can support children in care? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This time we are going to co-create using a shared dashboard on Miro. Use the sticky notes to add your views about the four guiding questions – they are replicated on the Miro dashboard. Use as many sticky notes as you want and feel free to write long answers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Posts on a shared Miro dashboard using sticky notes.
CC #5: LGBTQIA+ Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you imagine that LGBTQIA+ children will be experiencing their rights in 2030? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Write or record a story in which you describe what the world, your city or your community will look like for LGBTQIA+ children in the future. Stories can be written or recorded and uploaded as a text, image or audio file. If you decide to use paper, please take a picture of your story to submit it online. Be creative – You can explore things that do not exist in the present – different technology, nature, fantastical elements. Let your imagination fly! It could be a good idea to get inspiration from a friend or family member to create the character(s). Remember that the story is about childhood so if there is a main character, s/he must be a child (whether in the future or someone who is a child in the present but grew up). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video recordings. Posts on a shared Padlet.
CC #6: Juvenile system/children in conflict with the law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Ireland, the population in general and children and young people in particular are well informed about the rights of children in conflict with the law. I think it is true because... I think it is not true because... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen to the podcast with Prof Ursula Kilkelly, Head of the College of Business and Law at the University College Cork and specialist in juvenile justice, and Oscar, a primary school teacher who was unlawfully arrested as a teenager. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-creation of two mind maps on Miro.

CULTURE CIRCLES THEMES	GUIDING QUESTIONS	METHOD	OUTPUTS
CC #6: Juvenile system/children in conflict with the law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In Ireland, the population in general and children and young people could be better supported within the juvenile system if... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on this podcast and your previous knowledge about this theme, use the mind maps on the shared Miro dashboard to answer these questions. 	
CC #7: Children with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do children with disabilities feel that they can access their rights to play, leisure and culture? How? Do they think that their right to education is guaranteed? Are there any challenges involved? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk with children or young people with different types of disabilities and ask them these questions. Create a post on your Padlet with their answers – it can be a text or voice memo, whichever you prefer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Posts on private Padlets.
CC #8: Problem/solution tree		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A shared Miro dashboard was used to apply the "problem tree" method. The children were able to use sticky notes during the meeting to add to the tree (please see Annex III). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-creation of a problem/solution tree on Miro.
CC #9: Recommendations		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A shared Miro dashboard was used to create recommendations targeting specific actors involved with children's rights protection and promotion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-creation of recommendations using a dashboard on Miro.

Annex II:

Child-friendly coding framework



Annex III:

Recommendations written by the Youth Advisory Panel

Parents

- Parents should hear their child's decisions and don't let it go over their heads.
- Parents should be encouraged to be more inclusive and open minded.

Police officers

- They should allow children to ring their parents or an appropriate adult if accused of any wrongdoing.
- Should undergo implicit bias training to reduce racial profiling, bias against travellers and also disabled people (especially autistic people and children).

Teachers/Principals

- Teachers and principals should listen when a child says something, and not pass it off by saying "They're just a child!"
- They should give their students a voice.
- Schools should involve their students in all decisions relating to them.
- School should have gender neutral toilets and changing rooms because if not you have to go into the disability toilets.

- Schools should provide mandatory and comprehensive education on their students rights and what options they have if their rights aren't being respected. This should include information on the supports children and their families are entitled to relative to their needs rather than them having to seek out information themselves.
- Teachers should be trained in how to support their students that need support and should learn to spot indications of mental disorders/ disabilities in their students so that children don't get left behind.

Justice system

- They should provide children with information on their rights involving the justice system.
- More of an emphasis on rehabilitation of children in conflict with the law rather than punishment that doesn't help a child develop.
- Work on preventing children from ending up in conflict with the law (this applies to most of these sections especially schools and the health system).

Other

- Should work on a separation of church and state (especially within schools) government funded Catholic institutions are unavoidable in Ireland and can be over marginalising and non inclusive for many groups especially members of the LGBTQIA+ communities. Also religion being involved in education doesn't allow for the children to get a full education and doesn't for a safe and free environment in a place where children are supposed to not worry, develop and find themselves.

- Children deserve the same amount of respect as an adult. A good place to start would be students in school and the staff.
- Voting age lowered to 17/ some ways for children (especially teenagers) voices to be heard. Many laws really impact them, such as contraception and reproductive rights, laws surrounding schools and also employment.

Social workers

- The child in the situation shouldn't have to do anything that they don't want to do.
- Listen to the child, the family, the neighbours, the community, the school those who know the situation on the ground. Experience doesn't come from books, it comes from life.

Policymakers

- They should lower the voting age so that children have a bigger say in policies that may affect them.
- They should answer emails of children as if they want us to believe that they'll do what they can we if they don't do anything to help us.
- Children should have a say in policies.

Health system

- Governments should invest more money in children's mental health services. Some of these services should be provided within schools so that they are more accessible (provided by properly trained professionals).
- Make impossible for children to access medical help when they have unsupported parents/ very relevant with mental health.

Annex IV:

Problem/solution tree

The green 'leaves' represent specific problems

- Children struggle to access any mental health support that is affordable, easy to access, effective and that doesn't have an 11 month long waiting list.
- When something happens to the child people ask the parents about it even though the child could probably explain what happened to themselves better.
- LGBTQIA+ children often feel isolated and like they aren't accepted.
- Teachers don't really care about our mental health.
- Children Voices are often ignored and belittled.
- Children Voices are often ignored and belittled.
- Most of the teenagers fell most of the time that they are talking to a wall.
- Any existing resources are hard to access or find out about.
- Teachers don't teach us about all the rights other than food and shelter.
- I don't think that adults believe children that much when children say something happened.
- Teachers and maybe resource teachers too easily and often times are unprepared for the weight of the work needed.
- Most of the teenagers fell most of the time that they are talking to a wall.

The orange 'trunk' represents causes of these problems



The blue 'roots' represent what allow the common causes to grow

- Children's voices not being listened to or heard by adults.
- If a principal or teacher is corrupt or unfair often times they are not challenged, they are not called out because they are the top dog.
- Religious and old views of sexuality that are still very present in society.
- Not enough resources to help families and children.
- The stereotypes about children being stupid.

**CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS
ALLIANCE**
Uniting Voices For Children

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Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 140 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

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Voice, Rights, Action! Children's Knowledge about their Rights & Rights Education to Access Justice.

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