



Young people’s rights and their sense of belonging

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Introduction

On 3rd October 2008 the United Nation’s Committee on the Rights of the Child published its ‘*Concluding Observations*’ on how the rights of children and young people are upheld in the United Kingdom (UK) (CRC, 2008). Whilst the Committee was satisfied with some of the progress made, it also noted significant areas for improvement, for example, in relation to the incorporation of the UNCRC in all pieces of UK legislation. The Committee also expressed concern that there was ‘no systematic awareness raising of the Convention and that the level of knowledge about it (...) [was] low’. The Committee highlighted the ongoing discrimination and stigmatisation of minority groups, such as Irish Travellers and LGBT young people, and more broadly criticised ‘the general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents (...), including in the media’, which ‘may be often the underlying cause of further infringements of their rights.’ (CRC, 2008, pp.3-6). Specifically in relation to Northern Ireland, the CRC criticised the ongoing ‘problem of segregation of education’ including ‘academic selection at the age of 11’ (CRC, 2008, pp. 14-15).

In 2014, the UK was again observed by the UN Committee, and we are currently awaiting their comments. Whilst some progress has been made, the Alternative Report prepared and submitted by the NGO sector in June 2015 (CLC and STC, 2015) shows that many gaps remain and there is much scope for further

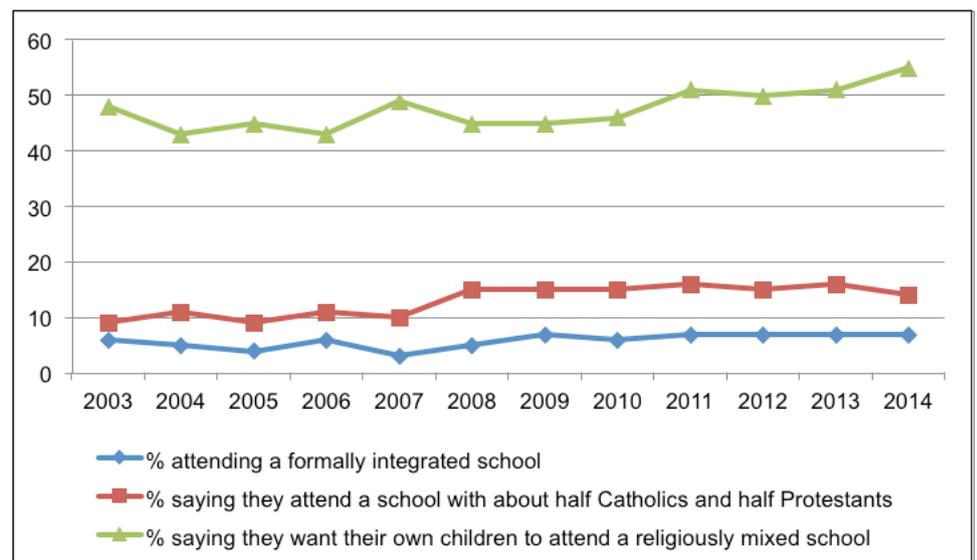
improvement. As OFMDFM is currently working on the next Children’s and Young People’s Strategy for Northern Ireland, this is a good opportunity to illuminate the discussion around the rights of children and young people, and the value of educating them about these. During the reporting period from 2008 to 2014, ARK’s Young Life Times (YLT) survey of 16 year olds, and Kids’ Life and Times (KLT) survey of 10-11 year olds have monitored attitudes and experiences concerning a number of issues and topics related to the UNCRC and the Committee’s Concluding Observations (see Stockinger, 2015; McQuade, Kehoe and Emerson, 2015; Emerson and Lloyd, 2014, Lloyd, 2013, O’Loughlin, Stevenson and Schubotz, 2011; NICCY, 2011). This Research Update briefly revisits the

issue of segregation in education before exploring the relationship between children’s and young people’s rights education and the sense of belonging and influence among 16-year olds.

Religious segregation

The evidence collected over many years that academic selection and religious segregation in Northern Ireland’s schools has detrimental effects on many children and young people is undisputable. The CRC will, without doubt, again point a finger at that and demand change. It is equally certain that any change will be slow, if there is any change at all.

Figure 1: Proportion of YLT respondents attending integrated and religiously mixed schools in relation to preference for mixed schooling (%).



Since 2003, YLT has collected data on respondents' school background, their perceptions of the religious mix of their school and their personal preferences for religious mixing.

Figure 1 reveals that there has been almost no change in attitudes and experiences over the 12-year period that this data was collected. There has been an insignificant increase in religious integration and mixing in Northern Irish schools. Administrative data confirm the YLT findings that approximately seven percent of pupils are now educated in formally integrated schools. Figure 1 also shows the gap between experience of integration and mixing on the one hand and preferences for mixed religion schools on the other. This gap has also remained stable and stood at 41 percent in 2014.

Own school experience is very strongly related to the mixing preference in relation to school choice. In 2014, only ten percent of those who attended a religiously mixed school, and only seven percent of those who attended a formally integrated school, would prefer their own children to attend a single-religion school. However, although the proportion of respondents favouring single religion schools was much higher among those who attended schools with all or almost all Protestant or Catholic pupil intake, in 2014 still only four in ten respondents would like to see their own children attending religiously segregated schools in future.

Academic selection

Whilst academic selection at age 11 was formally abandoned by the Department of Education in 2009, it *de facto* continues to exist via unregulated transfer tests set by grammar schools. In fact, the religiously segregated nature of the school system in Northern Ireland means that the Catholic maintained school sector now runs a different test from the predominantly Protestant schools, which has resulted in around one in five children now sitting two tests rather than just one (see 2011

Kids' Life and Times Survey). This paradox is unlikely to escape the CRC's assessors. In 2011 – the last time this question was asked within KLT, only 18 percent of children who sat the selection tests said they did not experience any pressure because of the tests.

As many primary schools are now 'officially' not preparing pupils for the selection tests anymore, some parents resort to private tutoring to prepare their children – in 2010, 45 percent of children who sat the tests had received tutoring (2010 KLT). However, tutoring is expensive and is therefore only available to those who can afford to pay for this. The 2013 YLT survey results confirm this. Whilst 73 percent of YLT respondents from not-well off backgrounds reported that they had never received any private tutoring at either primary or post-primary level, almost one in two respondents (49%) from well-off backgrounds had. The process of academic selection is therefore *de facto* also a financial sorting mechanism with disproportionately larger numbers of children from better-off homes being admitted into the prestigious grammar school system. Among respondents to the 2014 YLT survey, 42 percent of grammar school respondents described their families as 'very well off' or 'well off', whereas only 16 percent of pupils who attended secondary schools did. Among secondary school pupils, almost twice the proportion of respondents described their families as 'not well off' or 'not at all well off' than did among grammar school students.

Knowledge and awareness of rights

One of the key indicators for the CRC in terms of the implementation of children's and young people's rights is awareness of the UNCRC and of the rights they have. In 2014, almost one in two YLT respondents (49%) said that they had heard about the UNCRC – a significant increase compared to 28 percent in 2007 when this question was asked for the first time. Furthermore, 58 percent of

YLT respondents in 2014 had been taught about children's and young people's rights more generally, and four in ten (41%) of these respondents reported that this knowledge had helped them speak up about their rights in school.

YLT data suggest that the level of information on children's rights received is not related to the school type attended, although the emphasis of the teaching appears to vary slightly depending on what schools young people attend. Respondents from planned integrated schools were most likely to have heard about the Children's Commissioner, whilst grammar school students were most likely to know about the UNCRC. Sixteen-year olds attending secondary schools were most likely to say that they had been taught by their school about children's and young people's rights more generally. Interestingly, only one in three respondents attending grammar schools (31%) said that learning about rights helped them speak up about their rights, compared to almost one half in secondary schools (47%) and six in ten (61%) attending planned integrated schools.

An analysis of this data by family-financial background shows that not well-off respondents were disproportionately more likely to say that receiving education on children's and young people's rights also helped them to speak up about their rights as Figure 2 shows. Nearly half (48%) of respondents from not well-off backgrounds said this compared to just over one third (36%) of well-off respondents.

Sense of belonging

A core principle of the UNCRC is that children and young people have the right to be consulted in matters that affect them. But is there any evidence that learning about young people's rights really matters in terms of the realisation of their rights? Also, is there a relationship between the knowledge about rights and a sense of belonging to, and influence in, their community and society overall? The

2014 YLT survey data help to explore this. Although they have a slightly weaker sense of belonging to their community, 16-year old Protestants (78%) have a much stronger sense of belonging to Northern Ireland than their Catholic counterparts (65%). However, regardless of their religious background, fewer than one in ten 16-year olds felt that they had any influence on decisions being made at Northern Ireland level.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of this data on belonging by family-financial background, and shows that those from not well-off background have a significantly weaker sense of belonging to their communities than young people from well-off backgrounds. At Northern Ireland level, well-off respondents had a slightly greater sense of belonging. Respondents' sense of influence in their communities and in Northern Ireland was similar.

YLT also asked respondents to assess both their current and potential contribution to peace building. Figure 3 shows that 84 percent of respondents agreed that young people *could* potentially make a contribution, whilst just over half felt that young people *already* did this. Catholics were most likely to agree that young people already made a contribution to peace building (58% - compared to 48% of Protestants and 49% of those with no religious background) or potentially *could* make a contribution (87% compared to 79% of Protestants and 85% of those with no religious background).

Rights education and perception of influence

The YLT data show that there is a strong relationship between learning about young people's rights in school and a sense of belonging and influence in the community and Northern Ireland overall. Although this does not take away from the fact that only a very small proportion of 16-year olds felt they had any say, it

Figure 2: Proportion of YLT respondents being taught about rights and saying this helped them speak up on their rights. By family-financial background (%).

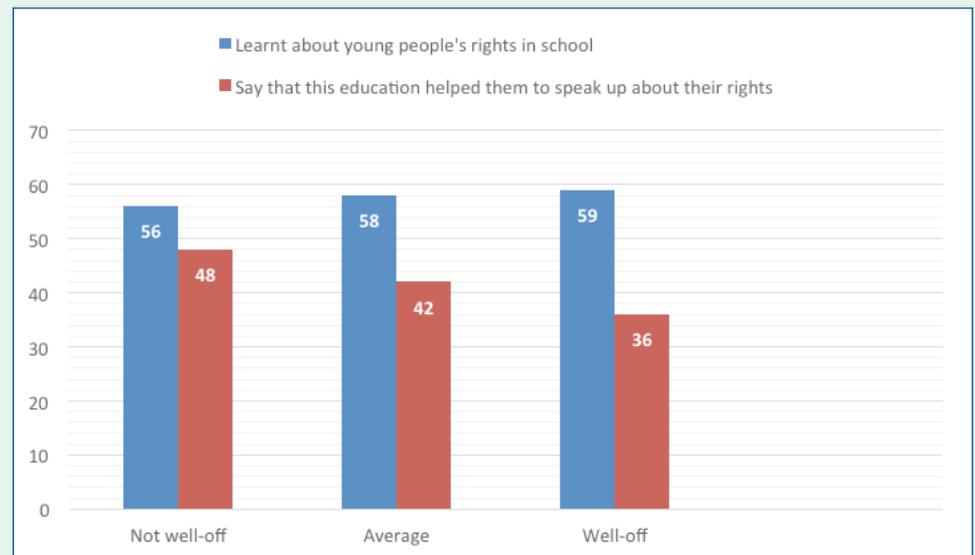
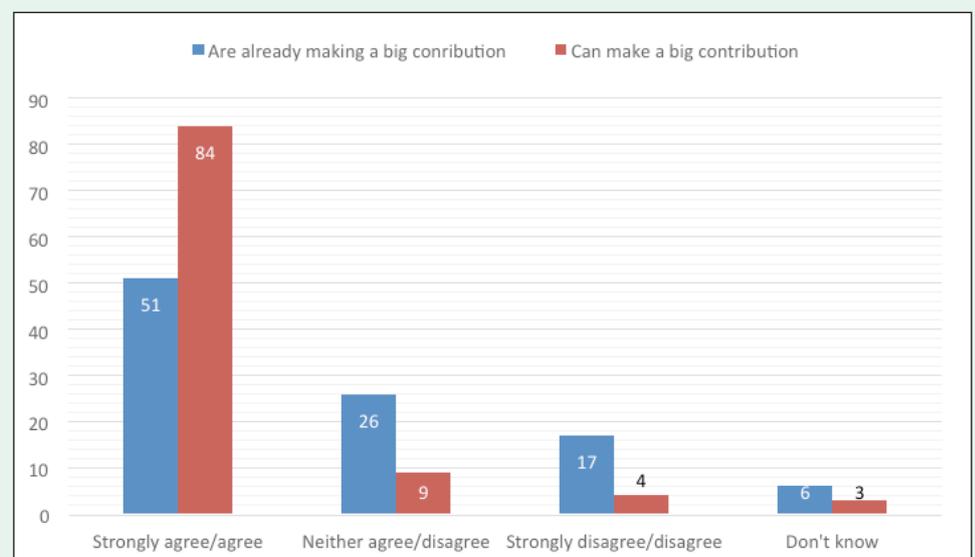


Table 1: Sense of belonging and influence at neighbourhood and Northern Ireland level. By family financial background

	%		
	Not well-off	Average	Well-off
Neighbourhood			
Sense of belonging	66	78	78
Can influence decisions	17	12	14
Northern Ireland			
Sense of belonging	64	66	71
Can influence decisions	8	8	8

Figure 3: Perceived current and potential contribution of young people to bringing the two main communities together (%)



is a notable finding that this sense of influence in Northern Ireland was four times higher among respondents who said learning about rights helped them

to speak up about rights than those who did not (16% and 4% respectively). Furthermore the sense of influence in their neighbourhood was twice as high

among respondents who spoke up about their rights in school compared to those who did not (26% and 13% respectively).

The causality of this relationship between education on young people's rights and the sense of belonging and influence is not clear. On the one hand it is quite feasible to assume that a young person who has a greater sense of belonging is likely to become more actively involved in their community; on the other hand, it is equally plausible that a realisation of rights through education results in these young people claiming their right to be heard in matters that affect them. As reported above in Figure 2, an interesting finding is that 16-year olds from not well-off backgrounds were most likely to report that learning about rights helped them speak up about their rights. This could suggest that some of the most disadvantaged young people benefit from rights education the most.

Conclusion

The YLT data suggests that there is a clear link between rights education received and 16-year olds' sense of belonging to, and their sense of influence in, both their community and Northern Ireland. Even critics who argue that schools should concentrate on 'proper education', such as STEM subjects, will probably concede that it is a positive outcome and development if young people, as a result of being educated about their rights, develop a greater sense of belonging and sense of influence. For many years, young people have been regarded as disengaged from politics and decision making. If education on children's and young people's rights will result in young people feeling they have a say and the aspiration to make a

Table 2: Relationship between rights education, belonging and perception of influence

	%			
	Learnt about rights in school		Spoke up about rights in school	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Sense of belonging to neighbourhood	79	70	78	79
Sense of belonging to NI	69	57	76	62
Sense of influence in neighbourhood	18	11	26	13
Sense of influence in NI	10	6	16	4
Agrees that young people can make a difference to peace building	86	81	87	83
Thinks that young people already make a difference to peace building	56	44	61	50

difference then this is surely a desirable outcome. Whilst it is predictable that the CRC will reiterate again the need to reform Northern Ireland's segregated and selective post-primary school system, realistically this will require a monumental effort which has to challenge deeply engrained structures, habits and attitudes. The YLT survey results show that 16 year olds - the future parents of Northern Ireland's children - support a substantial increase in mixed schools. If an effect of rights education is that it enables young people to take more ownership of this process and to speak out to initiate these changes, then this would be a very encouraging finding indeed.

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