



Addressing Children’s Rights via ARK

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The rights of children and young people have been at the forefront of ARK’s work since its inception. In fact, 20 years ago, the very first YLT survey in 1998 – which at that time ran as a sub-survey of the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey – asked children and young people between the ages of 12 and 17 years about their rights. Only one quarter of these young people said they had heard about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, three quarters of respondents felt that there should be a way to give young people a voice in politics in Northern Ireland. Much has happened in Northern Ireland society since then. Policy making infrastructure was put into place to support children’s right to be heard in matters that affect them. Most notably, in 2003, the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) was established. Northern Ireland also got its own ten-year Strategy for Children and Young People, while the introduction of the Unicef Rights Respecting Schools award in 2004 (Sebba and Robinson, 2010) encouraged schools to foster children’s participation in decision making from an early age.

So what, if any, difference have all these measures made in terms of increasing children’s and young people’s understanding of their rights? And more importantly, do children and young people feel that they have a role to play in making contributions to decisions that affect them more now than 20 years ago?

In order to give younger children in Northern Ireland an opportunity to express their views, ARK established Kids’ Life and Times (KLT) in 2008. KLT is an annual online survey of all Primary 7 children. Furthermore, in 2003, YLT was relaunched as an independent annual postal survey of 16 year olds. Thus, for the past 10 and 15 years respectively, ARK has monitored children’s and young people’s views and experiences at crucial status passages in their lives.

Awareness of rights

The issue of children’s and young people’s rights has been revisited in YLT and KLT in different contexts on a regular basis, and a retrospective look at the data allows us to track changes with regard to awareness of their rights over time. Given the legislative and policy changes that have been introduced in Northern Ireland noted above, it is timely to explore whether things have changed since 1998.

One of the key ways in which change can be assessed is by looking at children’s knowledge of the rights they have and the convention that established them (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). To this end, the YLT and KLT surveys have included a question on knowledge of rights and the UNCRC

Table 1: Respondents who had heard of the UNCRC by year of survey

Heard of the UNCRC?	%								
	Year of survey								
	1998*	2007	2009	2010		2012		2014	
	YLT	YLT	YLT	YLT	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT	KLT
Yes	25	28	33	39	25	40	28	49	28
No	72	70	62	57	60	60	72	46	54
Don’t know	4	2	4	3	15	-	-	5	19

Source: 1998-20014 YLT and KLT surveys

* Respondents to 1998 YLT survey were aged between 12 and 17 years.

since 1998. As Table 1 shows, among YLT respondents, knowledge of the UNCRC has risen from 25 per cent in 1998 to almost half (49%) in 2014. However, there has not been much change among KLT respondents and, by 2014, only 28 per cent said they were aware of the UNCRC. Given the requirement of the UNCRC that governments should make the Convention known to all children, the survey figures suggest there is still some distance to go to achieve this.

While it is useful to know how many respondents to YLT and KLT are aware of the UNCRC, and to track this over time, it is

equally important to assess the extent to which these young people actually know about the rights that are enshrined within the Convention. To address this, the 2007 and 2009 YLT, and 2010 KLT, surveys asked respondents what they knew about the rights of children and young people. Six per cent of YLT respondents thought they did not have any rights at all (2007) and this figure had fallen to three per cent by 2009. It is somewhat encouraging that the percentage of YLT respondents who thought they had rights and who said they could list a few had increased from 41 per cent in 2007 to 51 per cent in 2009 (Table 2). In 2010, respondents to KLT were also asked this question and while 4 per cent said they thought they did not have rights, 38 per cent said they had rights and they could list a few. As with awareness of the UNCRC, there is still some way to go to ensure that children and young people know they have rights and what they are.

Table 2: Which statement below best describes what you know about the rights of children and young people living in Northern Ireland?

	2007	2009
We don't have rights	6	3
We have rights, but I don't know anything about them	49	40
We have rights, and I could list a few	41	51
We have rights, and I know a great deal about them	4	6

Source: 2007 and 2009 YLT surveys

Involving children and young people in the KLT and YLT surveys

Whilst research with children and young people is not per se a vehicle to give young people a say in matters that affect them, the fact that research is used to influence policy means that they should be afforded the opportunity to be active rather than passive participants in research when appropriate. ARK has therefore worked with groups of children from schools in Northern Ireland to develop robust measures of participation rights (2013) and the right to play (2014) using a children's rights-based approach to research developed by Lundy and McEvoy (Emerson, 2009). This involved the establishment of Children's Research Advisory Groups (CRAG) among primary school-aged children (9 to 10 years) in Northern Ireland. This approach seeks to engage genuinely with children in the research process, from development of the questions, through to analysis and, in the case of the child participation questionnaire, dissemination of the findings to parents, teachers, peers and policy-makers. The questionnaires developed by the children showed excellent reliability and were, therefore, robust measures of the concepts of participation rights and the right to play (Emerson and Lloyd, 2017). In YLT, we have worked with young people as peer researchers on studies on community relations, school bullying and attitudes to minority ethnic groups (Schubotz and Devine, 2008).

In summary, there is clear evidence that some progress has been made in relation to children and young people's understanding of their rights and in the efforts of policy makers and researchers to involve children and young people in decision making processes. However, how far there really still is to go is evident in the most recent 2017 YLT survey which found that only about one in ten 16 year olds felt that they had any influence in local decisions where they lived. This figure was even smaller (7%) when it came to decisions being made about what happens in Northern Ireland. Clearly, young people still remain at the margin of decision making processes.

References:

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Notes:

This ARK Feature is part of ARK's Marking Anniversaries series, which reflects on important historical events, and explores how attitudes and perceptions in Northern Ireland have changed over time.