

Initial Teacher Education and Children's Participation: Missed opportunities, what we are [not] telling our student teachers

This research examines the extent to which Initial Teacher Education (ITE) prepares new teachers to support children's participative rights in schools. Such support is indicated within the Welsh Government (WG) legislative framework and is explicit in the Curriculum for Wales (CfW).

Definition of 'participative rights': the entitlement of a child to be involved in decision making within and about their education. This is based on, but not limited to, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child.

These rights are enshrined in the **CfW cross-cutting theme**: children must learn **about, through** and **for**, human rights.

Over a 12-month period we worked with ITE students and teacher educators to look at the pedagogic practices that embed young children's participative rights. We identified levers and enablers, tensions and challenges to participatory pedagogic practice, and have co-created insights for action.

We adopted an enquiry-based approach bringing together the different educational experiences and knowledges of our participants through focus groups and workshops. In the latter, we used provocations in the form of data from our earlier work with a group of in-service teachers of 3 to 7 year olds across Wales to unpack and deepen thinking about how children might be supported to participate, in an authentic manner, in day-to-day classroom decisions and in curriculum-making.

Findings

- Teacher educators recognise that the CfW, as a process-orientated curriculum, aligns closely with a participatory pedagogic approach. Teacher educators would like more opportunities to engage in professional learning around this issue
- There are missed opportunities for ITE students to develop participatory pedagogies and for learners in schools to participate in decisions and curriculum-making in the classroom.

- Despite the CfW explicitly requiring that children learn 'about', 'through' and 'for' human rights, ITE students primarily experience children learning 'about' human rights when they are in schools. Similarly, ITE providers currently support students to know about Human Rights Education (HRE), but they are not routinely supported to develop participatory pedagogies.
- Teacher educators and ITE students rely on formalised processes of democratic representation such as school council, eco-committee, to fulfil curriculum requirements about HRE.

Recommendations

To support ITE students to develop a range of pedagogic strategies that embed children's participation in day-to-day classroom decisions and curriculum-making we suggest the following:

- **ITE accreditation processes** should ensure that ITE providers are attending to the development of pedagogies in ITE students that support all children's enactment of their participative rights.
- **ITE providers** should ensure that ITE students gain (a) appropriate pedagogical and content knowledge and exemplification of participatory pedagogies, and (b) school-based opportunities to enact participatory pedagogies, within their ITE programme.
- **Welsh Government** should ensure there is professional learning and guidance available for ITE providers to supplement and/or reframe ITE programme curricula to optimise children's participation in the classroom. The ITE partnerships offer a rich model for collaborative enquiry-based approach to thinking through such pedagogical questions in light of CfW.
- **Teacher educators** should ensure that they are knowledgeable and confident in supporting ITE students to develop participatory pedagogies, responsive to learners in school, that in turn support the enactment of the CfW.
- **ITE providers and Estyn** should attend to the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership which clearly state that teachers must *"seek, listen to and take account of the views of learners in order to engage and encourage them as active participants in their own learning."*