

# Student Participation during Inspection

## A rights-based approach

### Introduction

The right of children and young people to participate in decisions on all matters affecting them is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), most specifically in Article 12, which relates to the child's right to express their views freely and have their views given due weight. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) emphasises that children do not leave their human rights behind when they enter the school gate (General Comment No. 1, 2001, para. 8). It avers that schools, and bodies providing services for children, establish permanent ways of consulting with children in all decisions about their functioning.

The Department of Education Inspectorate is one such body. Because inspection affects children, it is therefore a matter about which they are entitled to have their views sought, listened to, and taken into account.

Section 13 of the Education Act 1998 defines the Inspectorate's role, providing it with both evaluative and advisory functions. The advisory remit facilitates direct involvement in developmental activity at both individual school and system levels; this may include the modelling of participative, rights-based consultation approaches with children and young people during inspection. Indeed, the principles and commitments set out in the *Code of Practice for the Inspectorate* (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022) show a clear commitment to Article 12.

### The benefits of student participation

The benefits of student participation in decisions are widely acknowledged. They include the creation of a



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**The inspection of early learning and care settings and schools affects children; it is therefore a matter about which they are entitled to have their views sought, listened to, and taken into account. This article outlines the rights-respecting approach taken by the Department of Education Inspectorate in working with children. The approach gives them an opportunity to express their views about the quality of provision they experience and plays an important role in advocating for children's rights in schools and settings generally.**

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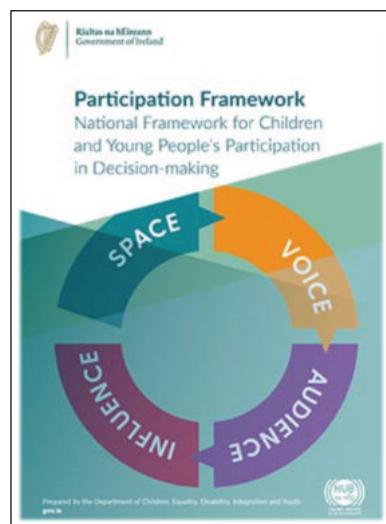
*The Inspectorate wanted to do more than treat children's views as a data source. It wanted to facilitate children to express their views freely during inspection and to have their views given due weight as part of an empowering, emancipatory process benefiting students, schools/settings, and the Inspectorate.*

stronger sense of agency, where students realise they can have impact on things that matter (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006); the enhancement of status through recognition of their capacity as insightful commentators (Frost & MacBeath, 2010); and honing thought processes by thinking critically about their experiences (Roberts & Nash, 2009). According to Lansdown (2011), a 'virtuous circle' is created: the more that children participate, the more effective their contributions and the greater the impact on their development.

Educational stakeholders also highlight considerable benefits when students are consulted, such as improvements in service provision (Shier, 2008), decision-making (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), and fulfilling legal requirements in schools (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Teachers and policymakers also gain access to the specialist and largely untapped knowledge that learners have about their schools (Czerniawski, 2012).

## Getting started

Involving children and young people in inspection is not new. The Inspectorate began to listen formally to them as part of the inspection process in the early 2000s through the use of surveys and focus groups. More recently, there was a renewed focus on whether the purpose and method of such engagement sufficiently emphasised children's agency or did justice to the principle enshrined in Article 12. The Inspectorate wanted to do more than treat children's views as a data source. It wanted to facilitate children to express their views freely during inspection and to have their views given due weight as part of an empowering, emancipatory process benefiting students, schools/settings, and the Inspectorate.



Informed by the work of its student participation team, the Inspectorate began a journey to developing a rights-respecting approach in how it works with children. This approach ensures that appropriate conditions are in place to enable children to express their views, however young they are; it combats negative attitudes towards their participation; and it leads to multiple benefits, including improved decision-making and outcomes (Lansdown, 2011).

## Three stages

Advice from school leaders and other government departments and agencies informed the developmental process. Critically, the voice of children from early years to Senior Cycle had a central part to play. The *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (DCEDIY, 2021) and the Lundy Model (2007) were influential in progressing the work. Lundy conceptualised Article 12 as encompassing space (opportunity to express a view), voice (facilitation to express a view), audience (to be listened to), and influence (views to be acted upon, as appropriate). The goal for the Inspectorate was to enhance opportunities for children's participation accordingly at all three stages of inspection: before, during, and after.

### *Before inspection*

To facilitate children and young people to express their views readily, inspectors need to be able to put them at their ease. This can be challenging in the context of a formal process such as an inspection. Children said that advance information about the purpose of inspection and the role of the inspector would help to alleviate fears, ensure consistent messaging, and enhance readiness to participate. They gave advice on the information that would be relevant and the most effective ways to share it.

The Inspectorate supports the principle that children have the right to information (Articles 13, 17) and adult guidance (Article 5) while their views are being formed, in order to be assisted in determining and expressing what will then be both a formed and an informed view (Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). A set of resources ensued, including information leaflets and animated videos for children in early years, primary, and post-primary, including an e-book for the early years.

In its publications and public engagement, the Inspectorate actively promotes children's participation. For example, published inspection guides advocate that all learners, from the youngest in our preschool settings to the oldest in our post-primary schools, should be given a voice, recognising them as key stakeholders.

The *Chief Inspector's Report 2016–2020* (Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022) includes a chapter on student participation, and the Inspectorate's April 2023 *Update* to schools and settings outlined its commitment to listening to children and young people. In its webinars for educators, the Inspectorate outlines why and how it elicits children's views during inspection. It explains that it does not reify the voices of students over the voices of adults in inspection; the views of teachers, school leaders, and parents remain important.

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### *During inspection*

To ensure that its engagement with children is enacted in a rights-respecting way, the Inspectorate focuses on the voluntary and informed participation of children and young people. Children provided advice about what would best help them decide whether to participate in focus groups; accordingly, informational videos were created about how focus groups operate during inspection. Children also advised on the strengths-based approaches that inspectors should take; thus, as part of the journey, inspectors were upskilled as rights-respecting focus group facilitators. In 2022–2023, the Inspectorate extended the use of focus groups to all inspection types where schools and settings get advance notice of an inspection.

### *After inspection*

In line with well-established practice, inspectors undertake post-evaluation meetings with the leadership and teaching staff of schools and settings to discuss the findings and recommendations following an inspection. A report then issues to the leaders of the school or setting for response and is subsequently uploaded to the Department's website for public access. Inspectors write these reports with an adult readership in mind.

Children said that the Inspectorate should also report to them after an inspection; they recommended the use of a discrete page for children. In early 2023, the Inspectorate trialled the inclusion of such a page in the inspection reports of a small number of schools and settings. This work is at an early stage, and the Inspectorate looks forward to progressing it in consultation with relevant parties.

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## Concluding comments

The Inspectorate believes that student participation in inspection, appropriately handled, provides considerable benefits for the Inspectorate, children, and schools. It is also aware that enhancing student participation is not easy or administratively expedient. It is continually seeking to improve how it seeks, listens to, and takes on board the views of children.

The Inspectorate has opted to take a Do-and-then-Do-More approach. In so doing, it commits to revisiting its approach for each of the three stages of inspection and, through consultation, to do more each time. In undertaking a proactive and informed approach towards recognising the rights of children during school inspection, the Inspectorate provides them with an opportunity to express their views about the quality of provision they experience and plays an important role in advocating for children's rights in schools and settings generally.

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