

Meaningful Consultation with Autistic Children and Young People for Inclusive Education

How can autistic children and young people be supported to be truly active agents in shaping their educational experiences? Autistic students have a fundamental right to be heard in matters that concern their education, a right protected under Articles 12 and 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disability. Yet educational policies and research rarely include the voices of autistic children and young people. We must ask these students what they consider beneficial and meaningful in their own education, in order to identify supports that are relevant to students and their families and supports that are more likely to be translated into practice (Keating, 2021).

A growing body of research in Ireland is dedicated to including meaningful consultation with autistic children and young people about their educational experiences, from opportunities for inclusive play in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (e.g., O’Keeffe & McNally, 2023) through to equal access and inclusion in higher education (e.g., Sweeney et al., 2018).

Autistic children’s right to inclusive play

Children’s right to play is recognised by the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989), and play underpins curricula in ECEC, yet the play of young autistic children is often neglected in educational research. In a large-scale participatory study of the play of autistic children and neurotypical peers, children as young as five have shared their views of play and what it means to them in school (O’Keeffe & McNally, 2023). This groundbreaking research deepens our understanding of play in ECEC and prioritises autistic children’s rights to express their views about this critical part of childhood experiences.



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What does meaningful consultation with autistic students look like? This article draws on contemporary research projects in Ireland which consult with autistic students about their educational experiences, from early childhood to primary and secondary school. It outlines why seeking these perspectives is critical for recognising children’s rights to be heard on matters which concern them and for identifying supports that are meaningful to autistic children and their families.

Participatory research with autistic adults also challenges a deficit view of the play of autistic children. Instead it highlights the importance of the social aspects of play for autistic children, while recognising the roles of solitary and sensory play for self-regulation in busy classrooms (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2023).

The pivotal shift to meaningful participation in research means that not only do we gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of play, but we actively show respect for children's rights in education, resulting in clear, research-based, child-centred recommendations for ECEC practice. For example, practice in early childhood settings and classrooms should recognise diversity in play while acknowledging that 'autistic and non-autistic children alike may benefit from help and strategies to support them in creating enjoyable and inclusive social play opportunities with each other' (Gibson & McNally, 2024).

Listening to and learning from all autistic students

Similarly, new participatory research with autistic children in primary and secondary schools in Ireland highlights the importance of relationships and social connection in school, and recognises the need to provide space and time to recharge and self-regulate in busy school environments (McNally et al., 2023). These initial findings are from primary-school autistic children taking part in the Autism-Friendly Schools project, a large, interdisciplinary study of primary and secondary school experiences of autistic students and their families in Ireland, funded by the Irish Research Council and in partnership with AsIAm. Participatory methods are central to meeting the policy and practice objectives of the study.

The Autism-Friendly Schools project is guided by an adult advisory group comprising autistic advocates, parents, and members of the wider school community and a child and youth advisory group (CYAG) comprising autistic students. Together they inform the study's development, including the research questions, methods, and analysis. For example, the CYAG has highlighted the potentially positive impact of increased autism awareness and advocacy (e.g., AsIAm, 2023) on the school experiences of autistic students. This has resulted in a focus in the study on the potential impact of awareness and understanding among the wider school community on students' school experiences.

Consulting with non-speaking students

A major objective of the Autism-Friendly Schools project is to include the voices of non-speaking and minimally speaking autistic children, who are persistently under-represented in educational research. We began by using more established participatory methods of photo-voice elicitation and drawing, to

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support autistic children to share their views and experiences of school. The next step is to develop new participatory methods individualised to young children and to non-speaking and minimally speaking autistic students.

Our approach recognises that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work in autism research or practice, and we draw on the concept of ethical listening in developing new methods of data collection. Ethical listening occurs when we ‘respectfully attend to multiple representations of human experience and knowledge with all of our senses’ (Lebenhagen, 2020, p.129). For example, an ethical listener pays attention to body language in addition to the individual’s mode of communication, such as a typed response.

This is perhaps where consultations as part of participatory research are most meaningful and pivotal in breaking through barriers. Through child-centred, individualised participatory methods, educational research can and should strive to hear the voices of all autistic children.

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The Autism-Friendly Schools project

The study is based at the Dublin City University Institute of Education, and the team comprises Dr Sinéad McNally (principal investigator), Professor Mary Rose Sweeney (co-principal investigator), and Dr Lisa Keenan (postdoctoral researcher). Dr Aoife Lynam is a former postdoctoral researcher on the project. The study is guided by two advisory groups comprising multiple stakeholders from the autism and wider school communities.

You can contact us at autismfriendlyschoools@dcu.ie, and visit our web page at www.dcu.ie/instituteofeducation/autism-friendly-schools-project.

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First Irish Satellite is launched into Space

The historic launch by the UCD project team of Ireland's first satellite, EIRSAT-1, has been welcomed by Neale Richmond, Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail.

The UCD-based project was undertaken as part of the European Space Agency's (ESA) "Fly Your Satellite!" Programme.

Minister Richmond said:

"History has been made with Ireland's first satellite, EIRSAT-1 being launched into space. This is a huge moment for Ireland, and for our space sector. The team in UCD has worked tirelessly on this project, and I had the privilege of meeting them earlier this year and seeing at first hand the huge amount of work that has gone into the project. This is a day of celebration for the culmination of the efforts of the team over the last few years."