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'Seen and Heard': An exploration of Early Years Educators' Perceptions of Young Children's Participation Rights in the Early Childhood Education and Care Curriculum, using Síolta Standard 1: 'Rights of the Child' (2016)

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. Theory and policy development in the area of early childhood education and care in Ireland have moved from a 'needs' and 'rescue' perspective to a 'rights-based' perspective, advocating for children as competent and capable citizens with a right to participate and have their voice heard in matters that affect them. Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (CECDE, 2006) identifies 'Rights of the Child' as its first quality standard.

The project is motivated by the main research question: What are the perceptions of young children's participation rights in the early childhood education and care curriculum amongst early year's practitioners? Sub-research questions focus on how children and their right to participate are regarded by ECEC practitioners; what is practitioners' understanding of ECEC curriculum and the impact this has on rights-based perceptions; and how are the three components of Síolta Standard 1: Rights of the Child interpreted into everyday practice? Qualitative data collection was based on individual interviews, focus groups and solicited diaries.

The main findings of the research highlight the significance of the practitioner's 'image of the child' in realising children's participation rights in ECEC curriculum. The study found that although a rights-based 'image of the child' as competent and capable was evident, there does exist an underlying needs-based culture that views childhood as a time of innocence and dependence and a real appreciation for children's agency is limited. This impacts on a participatory curriculum as a needs-based view of children, leads to descriptions of an instructivist, adult-led approach to pedagogy as opposed to a constructivist, child led-approach. There was little awareness amongst participants of Article 12 of the UNCRC.

Síolta Standard 1 was identified as an accessible and useful tool for practitioners to reflect on rights-based practices, with time and resources for child-led play, respectful adult-child interactions, a responsive daily routine and planning for an emergent curriculum being identified by participants as the key features to realising the standard in practice. Many ‘tokenistic’ interpretations of participation highlight a need for further awareness of children’s rights in order to practice true participation. As continuous professional development was identified as a key factor in promoting rights-based perspectives of children and rights-based curricula, further focus on the rights of the child through training and mentoring is recommended in order to fully embed the rich image of the child and the participatory curriculum as put forward by Aistear and Síolta.