



Are children getting the opportunities to realise their right to play?

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In recent years, the importance of the child's right to play has become increasingly recognised as being integral to the acquisition and development of skills and competencies as well as promoting enhanced health, well-being and resourcefulness (O'Loughlin, 2014). Through play, children can create their own self-protection and to an extent play is the principal way in which children participate within their own communities. However, being able to play is dependent on children having time, space and licence to play, which in turn is dependent on a range of social, cultural, economic and political factors. In Northern Ireland a policy framework for play has been underway since the mid noughties, culminating with the designation of Play and Leisure as a signature programme under the Delivering Social Change Framework. Although play is an entitlement of childhood that is enshrined within Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the evidence-base supporting the right to play is at best, in development. In 2012, the Kid's Life and Times (KLT) annual online survey of 10 – 11 year olds asked children to indicate what they knew about children's rights. 67% of children indicated that they knew of their right to have a safe place to play. In the 2013 survey, a module using a child rights-based approach explored the extent to which children felt their views were sought, listened to and acted upon in the school and community context (Article 12). Adopting a similar approach to explore the extent to which children are realising their right to play has the potential to help alleviate the dearth of

evidence that exists regarding children's opportunities to play.

Children's rights-based play

Seeking children's views on their right to play is an important component of gauging how states parties are guaranteeing their obligation to ensure that Article 31 rights are being respected, protected and fulfilled. Article 31 states that those acting on behalf of the state should '*recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts*'. In response to its concern that states were failing to adequately recognise the rights contained in Article 31, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) released a general comment on Article 31 (United Nations, 2013).

In the general comment, the CRC who monitor how states are complying with the Convention affirm the close alignment between Article 31 and the four underpinning general principles of the Convention: the child's right to non-discrimination (Article 2); the best interests of the child as a primary consideration (Article 3); right to life, survival and development (Article 6); and the child's right to express their views and have them given due weight (Article 12). For the fulfilment of obligations under Article 31 the Committee explains that schools '*should play a major role*' and that local authorities must ensure public planning prioritises the creation

of environments which promote the well-being of the child.

Given the lack of data on how children experience their right to play as articulated by Article 31 of the CRC and the inter-related articles noted above, PlayBoard NI, working in partnership with the Centre for Children's Rights, Queen's University Belfast commissioned and funded a module in the 2014 KLT survey to ascertain the extent to which children felt they had opportunities to play in their school and outside of their school. PlayBoard NI is the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland and is committed to listening to the expert voice of children on how they want to play. The Centre for Children's Rights is an inter-disciplinary research centre, committed to ensuring that its research is compliant with Article 12 and has developed a track record of working with Children's Research Advisory Groups (CRAGs). Given that both organisations are committed to using children's rights methodologies, the questions for the module were developed in collaboration with two Children's Research Advisory Groups (Lundy and McEvoy, 2012) and PlayBoard's group of Young Researchers. The children in the two CRAGs were aged between 10 and 11 years and were pupils at St. Ita's Primary School, Belfast and Christ the Redeemer Primary School, Belfast. The Young Researchers from PlayBoard were aged between 10 to 14 years and had investigated the right to play in their previous research. Their experience as peer researchers gave them the capacity

and ability to provide specific insights to the development of the KLT statements.

Developing the Questions

In initial sessions with the children, time was spent familiarising them with children's rights and in particular the right to play. The children were then asked to imagine what a school would look like where the adults really respected children's right to play (see Figure 1). The children generated a number of statements which were then collated by the adult researcher. The process was repeated with children generating statements for a community or home that really respected children's right to play.

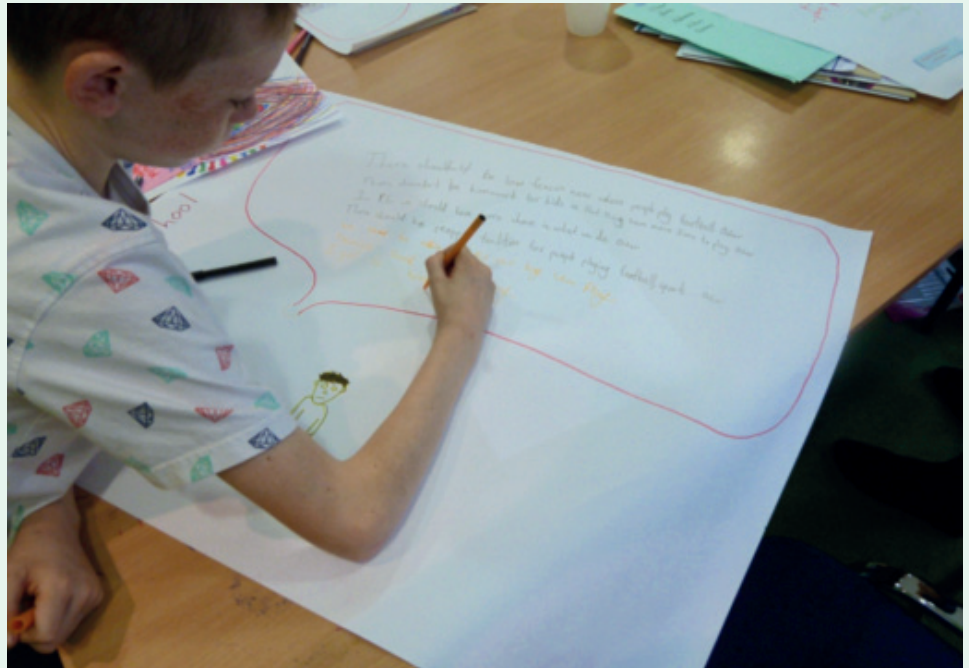
The children in the CRAGs and the Young Researchers were aware that the KLT module only allowed for a set number of questions, and negotiated with each other until the full set of statements were reduced to 14 items (5 relating to school; 9 to community and home) (see Table 1) along with one open-ended question. The adult researcher worked with the children to ensure that the items selected also reflected the core components of rights-based opportunities to play.

All P7 children in Northern Ireland were invited to take part in the KLT survey. Of the 4,757 children who logged on to complete the survey, 2,420 had the option to complete the play module. The fieldwork for the 2014 KLT survey was undertaken between November 2014 and January 2015.

Are schools and communities respecting, protecting and fulfilling children's right to play?

Table 1 shows the overall results for the questions asked in relation to the children's experience of their right to play in their school and home or community

Figure 1: Young Researchers example of a school that respected children's right to play



contexts. Play in the home or community represents play outside of the formal school day, therefore this play context is reported as play in the community setting. Overall, the data indicate that children are positive about their right to play, in that the majority of children either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with all of the statements. However, given that Article 31 is a right and state parties are obligated to guarantee that this right is respected, protected and fulfilled, the level of disagreement and strong disagreement with the statements is striking and requires exploration.

In the school context the vast majority of children report: feeling safe when playing (89%); being able to play freely with friends (84%); and having enough space to play (83%). However, almost one in four (24%) report they either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with 'I have a good choice of things to play with in the school playground', while just over a fifth (22%) report they either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that 'I have enough time to play in school whether at break or lunch time'.

In the community context the vast majority of children report: being able to play outside (90%); having enough space to play (88%) and having a good choice of things to play with (86%). Despite

the strong levels of agreement, 14% of children report that they 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that when they go to the park the equipment is in good condition. Almost one in ten (9%) children report they either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that 'I have enough time to play'. Similar proportions report they either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' that 'I can play freely with my friends' (10%); 'I can easily access green spaces like parks' (9%); 'I can play with my family' (8%); and 'I feel safe when I play in my community' (8%).

Figure 2 presents a comparative perspective of the children's responses to how they play within their school and community contexts. A number of observations are notable including the lower level of agreement with 'I have enough time to play' in the school (3.59) and community (3.95) contexts compared to other statements. Further, when asked to rate 'I have a good choice of things to play with' the school context scored lower (3.56) than the community (4.21), and appears to confirm the repetitive and static nature of play in the school playground. Other observations include the slightly higher score in the school context (4.22) that 'I can play freely with my friends' compared to the community (4.03). This may suggest that

Table 1: Children's views on their right to play in school and in their community (%)

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%	%	%	%	%
At home or in the community.....					
I have enough time to play	3	6	15	43	33
I have a good choice of things to play with	3	4	9	41	45
I can play freely with my friends	4	6	14	37	40
I can play with my family	3	5	12	34	46
I have enough space to play	2	3	7	34	54
I can play outside	2	2	6	30	60
I can easily play in green spaces, like parks etc	3	6	11	31	50
When I go to the park the equipment is in good condition	5	9	20	40	27
I feel safe when I play in my community	2	6	19	41	32
In school at break or lunchtime.....					
I have enough time to play	7	15	15	39	24
I have enough space to play	3	6	9	38	45
I can play freely with my friends	2	4	10	38	46
I have a good choice of things to play with in the playground	9	15	16	33	27
I feel safe when I play in school	2	2	8	36	53

children are slightly more rooted to their school friends than those in their community. The tight bounded nature of the school playground may be influencing the children's responses to having enough space to play in their school (4.16) compared with the community (4.35) and also how safe they feel in their school (4.36) compared with the community context (3.95).

Analysis of the KLT results by gender indicate that overall there is no difference reported between girls and boys regarding their right to play in the community as a whole, however girls are slightly more positive about their right to play in school than boys.

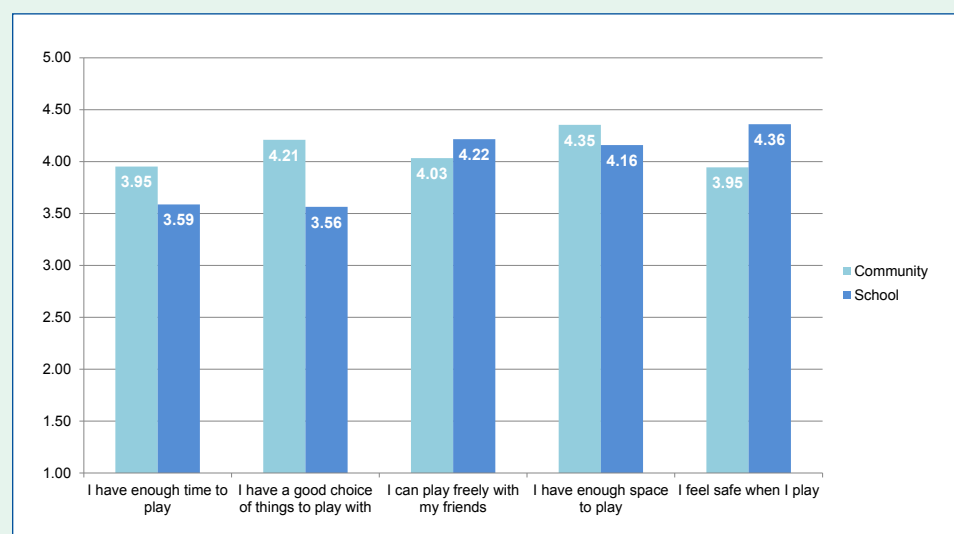
What could be done to make sure that all children have opportunities to play?

The majority of the children (77%) who completed the play module of the KLT survey answered an open-ended question, which asked: 'What do you think could be done (in your school or in your community) to make sure that all children can enjoy playing as much as they can?'

One of the key findings of this survey is the strong level of agreement with the statements. However, the open-ended responses clearly highlight that many children have concerns about their opportunities to play. Many refer to wanting 'more time to play', having 'a longer break and lunch time' as well as a degree of discontent about playgrounds, 'being crowded', and in need of 'some green space'. Solutions suggested include 'get more equipment'; 'have more things to do in the playground' and to recognise the need for 'more equipment in the older school playground'. Further, the interdependence between Article 31 and Article 12 was evident in comments about listening to 'children's ideas about what they want to play' and 'to write suggestions or tell the student council'.

Many children also responded from the perspective of the community context, highlighting the need for: 'more parks';

Figure 2: Level of agreement with the following statements of how children play in their school, home or community (%)



*Meaning of the scores: 1=Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly agree (Missing values and 'Don't know' responses excluded)

‘updating the current parks’ and ‘cars to drive slowly around the neighbourhood’. The powerful, innate desire to play is epitomised by the comment ‘there should be more grass spaces to play for children from all different religions to play on it’.

Conclusion

While it is encouraging that many children feel they can play in their school and community settings, it is also evident there is further scope to ensure that every child’s right to play is respected in all aspects of their lives. It is somewhat concerning that children report greater levels of disagreement with the statement ‘I have enough time to play’ in both their school and the community contexts. Further, the responses highlight that children have specific but basic requirements to enable them to play. For example, having a choice of things to play with scored low in schools and the condition of play park equipment was highlighted as a particular concern

within the community. The findings clearly show that schools need to pay attention to creating the conditions to better enable children to realise their right to play. Similarly there is an onus on local authorities to ensure that the type and quality of fixed play equipment being installed is fit for purpose and kept in good condition. A minority of children report they cannot play freely with their friends in their community. This finding may suggest they are not participating in their communities, are possibly displaced and to an extent isolated in their homes. Again this highlights the obligation on local authorities to ensure that environments are free from traffic, litter and other physical hazards and to allow children to circulate freely and feel safer within their local neighbourhoods. Given that Article 31 rights are so critical to the development of every child, it is clear that a range of decision-makers are responsible for ensuring Article 31 rights are enjoyed by all children.

References

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Key points

- The majority of children who responded to KLT felt positive that they have opportunities to play in their schools and communities or homes.
- Almost a quarter (24%) of children felt they did not have a good choice of things to play with in their school playground.
- Over a fifth (22%) felt they did not have enough time to play during the school day.
- One in ten children felt they could not play freely with their friends in their community, while (8%) felt they could not play with their families.
- Children reported being able to play more freely with friends in school (84%), compared with being able to play with friends when in their communities or homes (77%).
- Children reported feeling safer when playing in school (89%), compared with feeling safe when playing in their communities or homes (73%).
- Girls reported being more positive about play in the school context.

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