
ENGAGING SCHOOLS WITH A CHILDREN'S RIGHTS INITIATIVE FOR LINCOLN

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Introduction

This report presents findings from a research study funded by the University of Lincoln's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Scheme (UROS). These findings were generated from interviews with staff at primary and secondary schools in Lincoln. Participants were asked about their current level of engagement with students' rights in Lincoln City Schools, including potential previous or current involvement with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Rights Respecting Schools Award; inclusion of rights within the curriculum; and integration of a child rights approach in school organisation and management, with consideration of how to best include the voices of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Furthermore the research aimed to consult with schools about their willingness to get involved in a project called 'Children of Lincoln'. This project has been running since 2016, with collaboration between the University of Lincoln's School of Social and Political Sciences, City of Lincoln Council and Lincolnshire County Council, working towards the creation of a children's rights initiative for the city of Lincoln. The initiative will raise awareness of children's rights in Lincoln by hosting events for children and families, conducting research and eventually seeking official recognition as a UNICEF Child Friendly City. We also discussed the potential for engagement with a competition where children in the city's schools could submit logo designs, with the winning design becoming the logo for the Children of Lincoln project.

The concept of "child friendly cities" aims to ensure that city governments have the best interests of children in mind when developing its services and institutions, to ensure that "cities are places where children's rights to a healthy, caring, protective, educative, stimulating, non-discriminating, inclusive, culturally rich environment are addressed" (Riggio, 2002). At its core, the UNICEF-led initiative for child friendly cities uses rights-based approaches to treat children as partners in decision making, in terms of utilising their rights in accessing urban resources that affect their life and for the opportunity for inclusive participation in urban development, thus promoting rights in the city, and to the city (Van Vliet and Karsten, 2015, 3). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC) exists to impel the realisation of the need for children's rights at every governance level within states. For children's rights to be respected at a local level, cities and communities are needed to implement guidance and break down barriers that prevent the integration of children's rights into practice. Child Friendly City Initiatives are developed in the hopes of providing a mechanism to allow for this in reality and to promote and protect children's rights under the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2017). To ensure a city is "child friendly", it should consider the following: physical environments such as safe play spaces; the involvement of children in the local decision-making processes to allow them to improve their own local areas; the creation of training packages for different groups such as decision makers, teachers, parents and children; laws, regulations and planning norms that take children's needs and views into consideration; a unit or individual responsible for children's rights at a local level; and systems to monitor the impact of both the physical environment and community actions upon children (Kingston et al., 2007).

The inclusion of disadvantaged children is often difficult in 'child friendly' initiatives, as the provision of new opportunities often also have an associated cost for the user (the child in this case), therefore excluding children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Van Vliet and Karsten, 2015) from activities that would arguably benefit them the most. Another challenge in establishing a 'child friendly' urban space is children's physical health, which has emerged as a great concern, particularly in Western countries such as the UK, due to the recognition that physical fitness among urban children has been declining (Gleeson and Woodcock, 2007) and the rise of childhood obesity.

Methods

The purpose of the research was threefold:

- 1) To establish the current extent of school engagement with the children's rights agendas, for example their involvement in the Unicef Rights Respecting Schools Award, their inclusion of child rights in the curriculum, and the integration of a child rights approach in the organisation and management of the school.

2) To consult with schools about how they might get involved in the “Children of Lincoln” child rights initiative, including their willingness to engage their students in participation/consultation activities, for example designing the logo for the project, and generating a young person’s perspective on what a ‘child friendly’ Lincoln might look like.

3) To consider how children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds might best be included within the “Children of Lincoln” initiative so that their voices are included.

A total of 4 interviews were conducted, consisting of 3 individual interviews and 1 group interview which consisted of 3 participants, giving us a total of 6 participants. Amongst the participants, their roles included a Head teacher, Deputy Head Teacher, former Head Teacher, director of an independent school, and members of staff responsible for school council programmes. The schools included primary, secondary, special and independent schools.

The participants were recruited through contacting all schools in the city boundary via email, with the sample of participants including all of the staff members that responded and agreed to be interviewed. The small sample is therefore a consequence of the limited response, which was likely due to the challenges in using a summer student research scheme to undertake research with schools, and some delays in confirmation of funding. This meant that initial contact was made with schools at the end of the summer term and further contact at the start of the autumn term, when schools are often very busy. Gatekeepers also posed an issue as most schools were only able to be contacted through a generic email address which was often responded to by reception staff rather than the senior staff we were hoping to interview, therefore relying on the reception staff to pass the email on to the relevant person. This method of participant selection also represents a limitation of the research, as it is likely that only those already actively interested in the issue of children’s rights will have volunteered themselves to be interviewed, and this may have had an impact on the findings.

The interviews were semi-structured with a loose interview schedule to ensure that all topics that the researchers wanted to discuss were covered, but allowed participants to

explore these topics when relevant, as many of the areas overlap. Each of the interviews was transcribed, anonymised and then analysed to find the key themes and suggestions from each participant.

Findings

All participants had some understanding of what is meant by children's rights, For example, participants could name rights such as "drink, food that kinda thing, to have their emotional needs met, to have education, spaces to play" (Interviewee 6) and "leisure, play and culture" (Interviewee 5). There were varying levels of engagement with the promotion and protection of these rights within schools, for example some mentioned the use of school councils/parliaments to ensure the children had their voices heard, which was sometimes the only thing identified as used to promote rights in their school. In contrast, another school with a higher level of engagement explicitly teaches their children about their rights in lessons and using "DVDs...posters...wants and needs cards" (Interviewee 1) and as well as using school council, interviewees identified several key themes when discussing what children's rights meant to them including:

- Right to food and drink including healthy options
- Right to have their emotional needs met
- Right to space to play
- Right to have their voice heard
- Right to education
- Right to religious freedom
- Right to reliable, safe and appropriate information
- Right to a full and decent life regardless of disability

These rights were also identified as those that need to be respected in schools, based upon the articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹.

¹ See the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) at https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_summary.pdf

Interviewees did however, fail to mention UNCRC rights such as article 4 (implementation of the convention), article 10 (family reunification), article 11 (abduction and non-return of children), ... This is perhaps due to a lack of prior knowledge of the convention in some cases, or not seeing their relevance to education (for example article 10 (family reunification) might not be seen as relevant to schools) or perhaps due to a lack of understanding of these articles. This could potentially highlight these articles as those that should be focused on in resources provided to schools by the Children of Lincoln initiative in the future to ensure education around these issues.

Those interviewed knew whether their schools were involved with the UNICEF Rights Respecting Awards Programme, which has 2 levels of accreditation², with criteria based upon 4 standards of the Rights Respecting Schools Award. One school was already level one accredited, aiming for level two accreditation, some were happy with their level one accreditation and some not formally involved with the programme at all. Reasons cited for not being involved with the programme included a lack of awareness and conflict with other time-consuming commitments, such as involvement in school parliament/council and meeting criteria to be a church school. These other commitments mean that staff often felt that an additional scheme within their school would be too much pressure, for individual staff members, pupils and the school as a whole.

“I think the difficulty is when there is all these wonderful things is you need staff to gather the evidence and with schools there’s healthy schools, there’s eco awards, the list goes on and on , so we have stopped trying to get level 1, level 2, bronze, silver gold whatever because it’s just time and effort and someone is gotta keep on top of it, urm, it’s just too much so we are not aiming for any particular levels but later we were linking to the principles behind it, the theory behind it” (Interviewee 3).

Schools also promote the rights of children within their schools in addition to or instead of the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools Award through various activities such as:

² See the accreditation criteria for levels one and two at https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2014/12/RRSA_standards.pdf

- School council/parliaments
- In lessons already taught as part of the curriculum, particularly Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) and body autonomy lessons
- Through school values e.g. Christian values, secular values in value-led schools
- External visitors from various religious backgrounds to deliver assemblies to explain different practices and beliefs to the children
- School trips to various places of worship

Overall, schools very much adhere to children’s rights agendas through their own initiative, for example through the use of school councils, “the five R’s” (Interviewee 3) or “ASPIRE” (Interviewee 2) which were the values frameworks that these participants’ schools were based upon, with some taking this further in gaining Rights Respecting School status. To be able to teach children about their rights under the UNCRC, schools may need more support and education on the articles in the convention and how these can be delivered in practice to ensure the rights of children in their schools.

Obstacles to meaningful engagement with the ‘Children of Lincoln’ initiative

Having clarified what engagement schools currently have with children rights so far, we sought to understand more about how the Children of Lincoln project could support schools in engaging with the agenda and help them to overcome barriers to engagement. All of the participants commented that the curriculum, and the time constraints this caused, was a key obstacle. Whilst participants felt it is not a priority to teach specifically about rights, they also demonstrated a willingness to incorporate material relating to rights into existing lessons. Some interviewees felt that it may be a struggle/challenge to get other schools and interested parties involved voluntarily in the initiative. They expressed concerns about time and cost, and wanted reassurance that any future model for schools to follow proposed by the Children of Lincoln project would ensure engagement with the rights agenda without costing the schools, either in time or money. The group interview suggested that perhaps praise by Ofsted would be a good incentive for schools to get involved; “I think the biggest things schools face is, would it be approved by OFSTED... if they had an example where it

had worked, and OFSTED loved it, other schools would snap it up because they would think it's the thumbs up, we can go for it now" (Interviewee 4).

However, where schools were willing to support a children's rights initiative, there was an acknowledgement that not all children would benefit equally. Even if the rights agenda could be incorporated into lessons, this would potentially still not include all children, for example those internally or externally excluded from lessons. Issues of socioeconomic status were mentioned by every participant to some extent, with concerns that any costs associated with events hosted by the initiative would exclude those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. There were also related concerns that parents from less affluent, less educated and minority backgrounds, such as traveller backgrounds, might not engage with the initiative if the activities were extracurricular, as the interviewees have often found that those who would benefit most from such schemes are often the least likely to attend, even if the events are free. There were also concerns that some parents may struggle to engage due to low literacy levels or poor English fluency if English is not their first language. Some interviewees also had concerns that educating children about their rights might also cause some feelings of powerlessness for those children from less-privileged backgrounds, as they may realise that they do not have the same rights fulfilled as their peers from more privileged backgrounds.

Concerns were expressed about the stigmatisation of young people and how the negative stereotypes of youth may limit the success of the project, describing the importance of "breaking down the stigmas that society has of them because you get someone who is previously excluded from school" (Interviewee 4). This could potentially be a barrier to inclusion of some children. Those children who are "not going to school because every time I go to school there's a negative experience because of that stigma" (Interviewee 4) are missing out on their education due to non-attendance and exclusions. This participant argued that many people have negative perceptions of young people, including school staff, particularly towards teenagers/secondary school children, which often leads to them to be stuck in a cycle where they are missing out on school, which then leads to further disengagement with education, impacting upon their futures. These young people may be particularly difficult to engage with the "Children of Lincoln" initiative, particularly if delivery

is through schools, if they are not attending or engaging with school. Children's rights initiatives must also therefore be delivered by organisations outside schools.

Several participants highlighted that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child does not address issues of young carers and how their caring responsibilities impact upon their rights as a child. Therefore, they expressed their wishes for young carers to have their rights respected and ensure that they would be able to be involved in the initiative and related activities despite their caring responsibilities.

Some participants also highlighted the issue of dependence upon adults to fulfil many of the children's rights discussed, from ensuring the provision of nutritious food to protection from violence, abuse or neglect. This sometimes becomes problematic due to parents' notions of childhood – some parents share inappropriate information with their children, for example, believing that they are young adults rather than children, therefore undermining their rights as a child; "Yeah we have some adults who... that's happening at home, and it's awful and they say that the children are fine because we've told them that we're splitting up and well, they're not fine, it's not as easy as that and it's educating the adults, I seem to be spending a lot of time in my role, counselling adults and the parents and you think when did this become my job, but that's what it is" (Interviewee 3).

Recommendations

The interview participants offered a number of suggestions about how the Children of Lincoln initiative could support activities to help raise awareness of children's rights in Lincoln.

Many participants expressed interest in the potential for an online sharing resource to collaborate and collect resources, ideas and best practice for rights involvement and education within the curriculum, relating to the United Nations Convention Rights of the Child. This would help to reduce pressure on teachers to create new resources as they can be more simply integrated into current curriculum and lesson plans. This would also

encourage further collaboration between schools and teaching staff. Resources would have to range from bite size resources to full lesson plans and ideas for incorporation of rights into subjects. The idea is to ensure that education around children's rights remain unobtrusive and not time intrusive. Ideas for incorporation include adding children's rights to the teaching of current British Values within the curriculum.

Further suggestions from participants for engagement with the Children of Lincoln Initiative and further education of children's rights included bringing in an outside speaker or inviting a group to present an assembly. Participants suggested that children are more receptive to external performances, including educational drama productions and presentation. Another suggestion was to introduce a partnership with the Lincolnshire Children's University, involving providing children with 'passports', that are completed through accredited afterschool activities and local business held activities. This leads to a graduation ceremony for the children on completion. This was recommended as the participant believed it can "raise aspirations" (Interviewee 3) as the children are motivated to participate in the accredited activities as they get to 'graduate' for doing so. This does however need further investigation to explore how to ameliorate potential inequalities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thus this may be a future activity to run via the initiative, where the Children of Lincoln activities could become Children's University accredited and therefore an activity towards the completion of the children's passports.

Other suggestions included the utilisation of the LAFTA's (Lincolnshire Awards for Film, Teamwork and Achievement) film award, which was previously a film competition aimed at Lincolnshire Schools. This could be researched for the potential for utilizing the program for further collaboration and competition between schools in terms of children discussing their individual rights through the medium of film. Participants further discussed that this could be used as a way of advertising children's rights by using the films as a way of discussing children's rights and for presentation in the city centre. One further suggestion included the exploration of presenting the Children of Lincoln initiative at education shows and local head teacher conferences.

All future resources and promotion for the Children of Lincoln initiative needs to be universally accessible. This includes the use of multiple language formats in outputs to ensure universal accessibility. One interviewee suggested that the resources and invitations to Children of Lincoln facilitated events should be distributed by direct engagement with families through family support workers and other support staff, who can directly engage with families rather than “a letter in a book bag” (Interviewee 6) which is easily missed and maybe not be accessible to all parents due to language and literacy barriers. Further information concerning city and local events outside the school system can be disseminated both through schools, and through social media and city webpages. Further access for families from disadvantaged backgrounds can be ensured by advertising on local notice boards.

Conclusions

From the schools that have been involved in the research, it is evident that they all engage with children’s rights initiatives to some extent, with varying levels of engagement with UNICEF’s Rights Respecting Schools Award and other activities independent of the award. It should however be noted that the participants were self-selecting so likely already had some interest in children’s rights, therefore impacting upon the results. All participants had a good general knowledge of rights, even if it was not the exact articles outlined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, but the existing knowledge could be built upon by education around the articles of the convention.

It would be beneficial for schools to have a prominent role in the delivery of the Children of Lincoln project, as this would ensure that all children that are in school will receive an education on their rights. Schools would need accessible resources that could easily be included in existing lesson structures in order to fit into schedules already time-restricted due to increasing curriculum demands and exam expectations, which have subsequently led to increased teacher workloads.

It has been suggested that schools who are actively involved would like to receive some sort of recognition or accreditation as an incentive to get involved in the Children of Lincoln project. Although there are concerns that this may deter some schools from getting involved as they will be concerned about the time needed to gain the accreditation, the successful delivery of a shared bank of resources would support schools to be involved with minimal time commitment.

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