CHILDREN'S RIGHTS MEET DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION:

Investigating Democratic Schools as a Space for the Realisation of Children's Rights in Ireland

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WHAT DID WE DO?

We visited three Irish democratic schools, conducting ethnographic observations and interviewing staff and students. Using a qualitative, mixed-method approach, the study explored whether democratic schools support children's rights identified in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which rights are actively experienced, and the extent of staff and student awareness of the UNCRC.

The findings indicate that **democratic schools** actively **foster children's rights** in, for, and *through* education (Verhellen, 1993). **Freedom**, **safety**—both physical and emotional—and **participation**, reflecting Lundy's (2007) model of space, voice, audience, and influence, were central to students' experiences.

Although the declarative knowledge of the UNCRC was limited, these rights were nonetheless realized in the daily life of the school. Participants also highlighted broader themes, including the role of education, power dynamics, adultism, how staff and students perceive each other, and the importance of trust and well-being in the school environment.
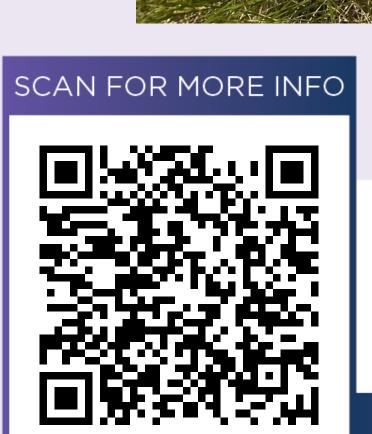

Children's rights and democratic education are very much connected…because in democratic education everybody has a voice.
(Staff Member)

I feel like students do definitely make a difference. You know, they should in the school.
(Student)

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Despite time constraints, a small sample, and methodological limitations, this study is significant for its **novelty**. Research on democratic schools in Ireland remains scarce, and these findings offer fresh insights into an underexplored area. A **key gap** concerns the implementation of the UNCRC: realising children's rights in practice requires not only legal recognition but also active knowledge-building through **human rights education**, especially in mainstream settings. The study also highlights future research directions, notably the theme of **well-being** in schools, which warrants further exploration (e.g. through the lens of Self-Determination Theory) to better understand how school environments influence children's learning, experience of agency, and overall well-being.

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