The impact of the UNCRC on children's participation rights in UK education: A mixed methods survey of teachers' application of and perspective on children's participation rights

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Abstract

The impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been found to be mixed. Though widely ratified and somewhat impactful on the perception of children in research, children's day-to-day lives have often been found to be unaffected by the convention, particularly in their education. This research sought to investigate the impact of the UNCRC on children's access to decision making arenas in their schools. Adopting a relational understanding of the agency required to give children meaningful opportunities for participation, 33 primary, secondary and sixth form teachers were surveyed and invited to offer their perspective of children's capacity for and access to arenas of participation at school. Utilising a mixed-methods questionnaire, data was gathered and analysed pertaining the age of the child taught by the respondents and the respondents' familiarity with and application of the participation rights contained in the UNCRC. Analysis of the results offered insight into the perception of teachers on their practice and the structural impact of the complex communication system of the school concerning the facilitation or inhibition of participatory decision making among their students. The findings and discussion yielded from this study explored the notion that schools in the UK in their current form inherently discourage unpredictability in the learning process, leaving teachers and students unable to demonstrate agency in their decision making and hindering the realisation of children's UN afforded right to meaningfully participate in decisions that affect them at school.

Contents

<u>Introduction</u>

The research undertaken leading to this report was designed to assess what role the participation rights contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) play in the practice of teachers in UK schools. Informed by a relational understanding of children's agency as the means by which opportunities for participation are co-produced, a survey was undertaken with a selection of teachers in primary schools, secondary schools and sixth form colleges to explore the UNCRC's impact, as well as that of the age of the children they teach, something that the UNCRC itself suggests should, in part, determine children's access to participatory decision making.

The report will begin with a review of literature relevant to children's participation rights and the role that educators and schools play in facilitating or inhibiting them, including an exploration of the notion of relational agency and what is meant by the 'complex communication system' exemplified by schools (Baraldi, 2022). The report will then proceed to a presentation of the mixed methods research design, research tool and data analysis techniques employed in this study, as well as some of the limitations of the instruments employed to gather data. The results of this research design will be outlined to demonstrate the respondents' familiarity with the UNCRC, its impact on their practice, the role of the age of the children taught and the respondents' perceptions of barriers which limit further participatory practice in schools. In the Discussion chapter, these findings will be reflected upon, utilising the perspectives of the teachers surveyed in an attempt to portray the role teachers play in the creation of facilitative participatory spaces in UK schools, as well as exploring their perception of the inherently limiting aspects contained in the complex communication system of the school.

The size and scope of this study are such that generalisable conclusions cannot be reached concerning the research goals under review. The case study contained in this project does, however, contribute to a greater understanding of how teachers view agentic participation in schools, as well as highlighting potential areas for future research and policy making which might remove some of the barriers identified in this study which prevent schools being more participatory spaces.

<u>Literature Review</u>

Participation Rights and the UNCRC

The UNCRC has been described as paradoxical in its success at shifting representations of young people at local and international levels (Liefaard and Sloth-Nielsen, 2017). The breadth and speed of its ratification- as the most extensively ratified human rights treaty in the world- suggests a comprehensive alteration of the way in which children are perceived, toward the independent, agentic and rights bearing citizens promoted by the convention. Nevertheless, the implementation of the rights it contains is routinely criticised, particularly in a UK context where it is not integrated into law, despite recommendations by the Committee on the Rights of the Child that this be done (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016). Children's participation rights are the focus of this project and are derived mainly from Articles 12 & 13 of the UNCRC;

Article 12

1. *States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

(UNCRC, 1989, pg.5).

The right to express views is often found in research to have had limited practical impact on the lives of children, whether in the courts- an area to which Article 12 specifically refers when exemplifying decisions to which children should have some input- or in schools, arguably the area of public life with which children have the most direct and impactful relationship (Tisdall, 2018; Bradwell, 2019). Similar failures of impact have been identified in relation to Article 42 of the convention, which requires member states to ensure that adults and children are aware of the rights and provisions contained in the convention, though limited empirical evidence exists to corroborate this (Mitchell, 2005).

One of the reasons posited to explain the limitations in the realisation of children's right to participate in decisions which affect them is a conceptual vagueness about the term

'participation' (Perry-Hazan and Somech, 2023). The challenge for researchers of the sociology of childhood, therefore, is to determine what decisions are covered by these rights, the extent of children's influence over decision making, and how best to ensure that this influence is commensurate with the age and capabilities of the child. In some conceptions of participation, children need only be "informants to the decision-making process" (Sargeant, 2018, pg.320). The encouragement of a child's 'voice' does not, in such an understanding of participation, require an ability to make decisions to be acknowledged. This should, it is argued, alleviate concerns among adults, particularly in education settings, that realisation of children's participation rights would upset the balance of power in the relationship between adults and children (Lundy, 2007; Sargeant, 2018). Children's role as participants in school settings can be divided into two categories, the voicing of an opinion during the learning process- generally referred to as 'pupil voice' and the opportunity to have an impactful say during decision making concerning their learning (Struthers, 2016). The notion that consultation with children is sufficient for the realisation of their rights is contested, however. Lundy (2007), for example, argues that "voice is not enough" and that for participation as a right to be realised, children must be given spaces to share their views, these spaces should contain relationships that encourage them to share their voice, an audience that is receptive to their contributions and that these contributions must be acted upon as appropriate. "Pupil voice" and its proliferation as a shorthand for participation in education settings, Lundy (2007) argues, fails to acknowledge that the rights contained within the UNCRC must be applied in their entirety, not understood as discreet articles which can be selectively applied.

Debate occurs about what kinds of decisions children should participate in, as well as regarding the extent and impact of their contributions. Mannion et al. (2022) propose, for example, that four key areas of decision making in school settings provide opportunities for participative practice, the formal curriculum-i.e. participation in and through timetabled classroom learning, the wider curriculum- such as clubs, trips, fundraising activities etc, decision making groups- such as school councils and specialised groups focussing on specific school policy issues and connections with the wider community. Although the last of these categories appears somewhat ill-defined,

categories such as these allow for research which assesses the application of children's participation rights to establish where opportunities are being taken and missed.

Where participatory methods are employed in the sociology of childhood, the types of decisions that children are invited to be involved in are less contested. Because such projects are devoted participatory spaces, without the same need to integrate new practices or relationships into existing social structures (such as schools), the focus can be what the extent of participation should be and how best to achieve this, rather than where it can be applied (Little et al., 2024. Upreti et al., 2024- for example). Greater pressure exists, therefore, for children's voices to be impactful, and to avoid the tokenism associated with school-based efforts towards participation. Participation in research settings has therefore been argued to have only been achieved where it is 'child-led' and involve children at the point of research design, data collection and analysis (Montreuil et al., 2021). Research with children, it is argued, should frame its participants as competent and autonomous in order to be fully participatory, with self-determination key to avoiding the imposition of adult viewpoints on the contributions of young people to research (Olsen et al., 2022). However, the notion of 'child-led' research has also been problematised, with Lang and Shelley (2021) pointing out that even in research which is described as child-led the participatory elements are designed by adults, and the dissemination, interpretation and presentation of data gathered remains the preserve of researchers. Participatory methods are often lauded as emancipatory or empowering for children, but some argue that children still operate in a highly constrained manner in many sociological research projects which are, ostensibly, participatory (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008).

It is clear therefore that the notion of participation cannot be- and has not been in the sociology of childhood- easily or consistently defined. What is consistent, even in criticism of approaches to participation in research and school settings, is the notion that *agency* and choice are vital. When deciding what aspects of school-life a child can influence or establishing the limits to children's ability to lead research, whether or not a child can or does independently make choices is the subject of debate.

Relational Agency

One way to overcome the contested nature of participation, both in a school and research setting, is to reframe one's understanding of the agency which is so vital to its achievement as a right. Agency in the sociology of childhood has traditionally been understood as an inherent and consistent trait. Constructions of childhood such as that of James and Prout (2015), which have been hugely influential on the development of the field, contrasted agency with the previously held notion that children were socialised by and products of their environment, as opposed to independent and active constructors of their social worlds. This came in the form of one of James and Prout's (2015, pg.7) five tenets of childhood in which children "are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives... [c]hildren are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes". The notion that children 'must' be seen this way has been enthusiastically taken up in the sociology of childhood, with the suggestion that children are agentic no longer contested, instead debate exists about the nature and extent of their agency (Oswell, 2013). Much of the research concerning childhood since the declaration of a 'new paradigm' in the sociology of childhood has focussed on empirical, often participatory, research which reaffirms the notion that children have agency, neglecting theoretical or critical developments to our understanding of it (James, 2010; Kay et al., 2012; Tatlow-Golden and Montgomery, 2021). This has been described as an 'either-or' approach to agency and structure, which implies a dichotomy between the structural and independent causes of children's behaviour (Koomson et al., 2021). Recent accounts have sought to create a hybrid understanding of children's decision making which acknowledges children's agency as well as the influence of the people and structural factors which influence their social worlds, pointing out that it must be acknowledged that agency is not consistent and universal. Abebe (2019), for example, characterises children's agency as contingent, interdependent, and operating on a continuum of behaviours. Other relational accounts of agency point out that it can be 'thick' or 'thin', in other words children may be presented with situations in which they have a many or few potential actions from which to choose (Klocker, 2007).

These conceptions of agency attempt to reconcile the idea that children have freedom of choice with the reality that these choices are often limited, and that children are often forced to employ agency tactically, particularly in challenging environments such as in violent, militarised conflicts, child trafficking and children's experiences as refugees (Klocker, 2007; Muftee, 2015; Koomson et al., 2021). A relational approach to children's agency which accounts for it in contexts where 'thin' or 'tactical' agentic decisions are made is often contrasted with a rights-based approach, which portrays children as victims of these circumstances, in need of protection from the exploitation of adults (Abebe, 2019; Koomson et al., 2021). For example, Koomson et al. (2021) found that in the movement of children from the care of their immediate family to work in fishing communities in Ghana, policy makers often mischaracterised the practice as trafficking in which the children were unwillingly 'bought' and 'sold' by adult parties. However, the study found that the children themselves typically gave consent to do the work and were often working for members of their extended family (Koomson et al., 2021). The consent given was a tactical agentic decision, made out of financial necessity, with the encouragement of parents and with a sense of responsibility for the family. It was also found to be somewhat ambiguous, with consent occasionally resulting from deceptive claims from parents or those for whom the children went to work. As a result, the authors do not claim that there is not a social problem here, they merely problematise the notion that children are passive victims of the phenomenon and point out that interventions which are to be successful must address children's active role in the practice, rather than seeking to rescue them from malevolent or neglectful adults.

Examples such as these demonstrate that just as it is inaccurate to imply, as research within the sociology of childhood often has, that children's agency is universal and consistent, it is also a poor representation of their agency to frame them simply as victims of circumstance, as often occurs when rights-based approaches to social problems are taken. Agency is a complex, dynamic and relational phenomenon, and researchers must not over-emphasise the child as a "unitary child-agent" operating as sole operators in decision-making processes, nor as passive responders to these interactions (Spyrou, 2018, pg.11). This is vital to the research of children's participation

rights in their schooling, where the complex process of agentic decision making can be understood as the process by which children's right to participate is achieved. As a result, the research undertaken here must endeavour to incorporate and explore agency as co-produced between teachers, students and the school environment in which interactions take place. To achieve this the perspective of teachers is key, as is the investigation of variables in interactions which might affect the co-production of choices for children, such as the age of the child and awareness and application of their participation rights on the part of teachers.

Agency and Participation in Education

Although the cultural and geographical settings in which research that has given rise to a relational understanding of agency has taken place may seem far removed from UK classrooms, our developing understanding of agency in the sociological study of childhood directly impacts how we understand and approach the phenomenon in all settings. UK schools can also be argued to be sites which inherently thin opportunities for agency and, therefore, access to participation rights. Baraldi's (2022) characterisation of agency as 'unpredictability of action' helps one to understand how this naturally occurs in a school setting. Agency means, Baraldi (2022) argues, that an individual could have acted differently during the course of an interaction, and that therefore we can understand agency as unpredictability (Giddens, 1984). Given the widely acknowledged pressure on educators to deliver results and demonstrable progress at each phase of the learning process, it follows that unpredictability in the actions of children is something that educators may be forced to discourage (Goodson, 2010). The pressure to demonstrate successful performance in teaching is a factor that has increased in line with a neo-liberal emphasis on competition between schools (Ball, 2003; Goodson, 2010). One might argue that when policy makers have considered 'choice' in the education of children, it has not been with a view to increase the opportunities for agency or participation among children, but to give guardians the opportunity to choose which is the most reliable and predictable path to 'success' in their child's education.

Baraldi (2022) frames schools as an example of 'complex communication systems', in which the actors in a given interaction, for example the teacher and student, and the norms, practices and objectives of the school as an institution, shape the extent to which the interaction gives rise to unpredictability of action on the part of those involved, usually for the purposes of research, the child. The practices and objectives of the school which help shape the extent of agency in the actions of the child are made up of, inter alia, teaching programmes, written regulations, organisational meetings between teachers, teacher-parent interactions, and assessments. While the child-teacher interaction is the site in which unpredictability of action either does or does not occur, it is one constituent part of a communication system, each part of which can constrain or enhance the number of potential outcomes of a given interaction (Baraldi, 2022). Baraldi (2022) does not characterise his conception of agency as relational as other recent theorists, such as Abebe (2019), have, instead choosing to forefront the notion that communicative interactions are the basic social operation through which complex social systems shape opportunities for agency. Nevertheless Baraldi's (2022) approach mirrors others discussed thus far in that it too seeks to decentre the child and rejects the notion that agency in childhood is a process by which children independently and creatively navigate their social lives (Spyrou, 2018). In fact, Baraldi's (2022, pg.22) system of facilitation can be argued to be a greater rejection of the individual's role in agentic action, arguing that "the production of agency does not depend on individual actions, motivations or intentions; instead, agency is produced in and through communications", which in turn occurs in and through the complex structures previously outlined. This conception of agency and the complex communication system through which it is created allows for a fuller understanding of how agency might be facilitated in schools and the interactions they host, reflecting the relational and contingent nature of agency in student-teacher relationships as well as the capacities and roles of children as actors in this process.

In order to establish how participation rights can be realised in school, particularly in light of the consensus in research that the UNCRC has had limited impact in this area of children's lives, it must be established what structural barriers exist which prevent unpredictable action by students. In their account of how participation rights might be

realised in schools, Lundy (2007) argued that barriers to the implementation of children's right to participation in schools fall into three categories. They consisted of; the belief by teachers that children lack the capacity to be meaningful contributors to decision making processes, worry that giving children greater levels of control will undermine adult authority, and the concern that the amount of time and effort which would be required to make change might be better spent on "education itself" (Lundy, 2007, pg.930). The time elapsed since the identification of these barriers and the lack of empirical backing in Lundy's (2007) publication would suggest that research which invites teachers to reflect on what barriers they feel limit children's participation in decision making might be valuable. Such insight is also called for given the more relational understanding of agency identified in this review, as well as Baraldi's (2022) identification of the 'complex communication system' found in schools which incorporate the values, norms and objectives of education systems themselves into our understanding of how agency is constrained. This more nuanced approach invites researchers to move beyond the identification of barriers which suggest individual failings or insecurities on the part of teachers, to see how they themselves are called upon to avoid unpredictability and assure demonstrable progress in each teaching interaction.

Methodology

Research Methods

Research on agency in education is required, therefore, which reflects the more nuanced understanding of agency and participation which has emerged in recent years. This theoretical shift calls for a reduced emphasis on participatory research which relies solely on children's voices as the source of knowledge. In order to reflect the relational nature of agency and to acknowledge that agentic and participatory behaviour by children in decision making in schools is contingent on interactions and school-wide structures which facilitate it. All of the actors in the setting must be incorporated into research on the topic.

The emphasis on interactions in Baraldi's (2022) system of facilitation of agency in schools leads him to call for research on the interaction itself, an approach which incorporates adult and child voices in the facilitation of agentic action. This is, they propose, best achieved through observation, video recording and detailed analysis of the structure and order of interactions between teachers and students. This is understandable and justifiable given the subject matter and is reflected in research which seeks to investigate how schools and teachers encourage agentic action or contributions often utilising comparable methods (Houen et al., 2016). However, this approach is not without drawbacks. Firstly, seeking to research typical day-to-day encounters can be impeded by the presence of researchers and recording equipment, which inevitably influence participants' behaviours, particularly when the purpose of the research is known to them. Participants in research of this nature are likely to subconsciously show their 'best' efforts, with teachers more likely to encourage agency and children perhaps more likely to seek to demonstrate it (Leung and Hawkins, 2011; Baraldi, 2022). Additionally, this approach is demanding in terms of the time and resources required. Houen et al. (2016), for example, reviewed over 170 hours of footage of teacher-child interactions to establish formulations which create space for agentic contributions from pupils. Additionally, conversational analysis is often the means by which data is analysed in research of interactions which seek to examine their structure and sequential features, for which, detailed and somewhat specialised recreation of oral communication is required in transcription (Psathas and Anderson,

1990). These factors make analysis of interactions in classrooms unfeasibly involved for a project of this size and may lead to an effort to draw conclusions from too limited a dataset. Additionally, a focus on interactions can lead to research which conflates enthusiastic involvement in interactions with agentic participation, ignoring children's right to participate in decisions which affect them (Decristan et al., 2023). Instead, I would argue that research on a scale appropriate for a project of this nature which acknowledges the relational and contingent nature of agency as well as the complex communication system encountered in a school, must focus on one of its constituent parts. Teachers, as actors in this complex system, with insight into the interactions in which participation either does or does not occur, as well as the social structure of the school, can be invited to reflect on the constraining and facilitating elements of school-life.

Turning to teachers as the source of knowledge in a research project does not perfectly reflect the changing understanding of agency. These developments are often predicated not just on the rejection of the completely autonomous, independent child-agent, but on a general shift toward a post-humanist ontological position in which non-human, structural, material and discursive factors shape and constitute social worlds (Zembylas, 2017; Spyrou, 2019). Therefore, research which seeks to examine the facilitation of agency in the school setting could be argued to require a method which examines either the interactions therein or the complex structure as a whole. Such approaches would require a broad, longitudinal review and cannot be achieved here. An alternative approach would be to position teachers as participants with insight into the interaction and the role of the communication system found in a school, by encouraging reflection on how they actively seek to facilitate agentic action in their pupils, what structural factors prevent them doing so to a greater extent, and their views on the capacity of the child to be involved in decision-making processes. Thus, the human participants become the source of knowledge but not the sole focus of research, as the non-human influences on a given interaction can be reflected upon.

Research Questions

With this approach to research in mind, and a desire to assess the extent and nature of agentic participation among young people in UK classrooms, while adopting a relational

understanding of agency as taking place in and subject to the complex communication system of the school, the following research questions have been employed to guide this project.

1) To what extent are teachers aware of children's right to participate in decisions on matters which affect them?
2) What role do these rights play in teachers' practice?
3) To what extent does this understanding and practical application differ according to the age group being taught?
4) What, if any, barriers do teachers feel limit children's participation in decisions made at school?

The first of these questions will assess the role of the Article 42 of the UNCRC and seek to establish an empirical basis for the claim that this article has not been realised in UK schools, in order to assess whether a lack of awareness of the rights and provisions of the UNCRC has impacted the realisation of children's right to participate in decisions that affect them. Question 2 will explore how teachers plan and execute lessons and interactions with children to inform understandings of their contribution to the complex communication system which facilitates or inhibits agentic action. The third question will explore what role the age of the child plays in the complex processes which shape participation, in line with Article 12's caveat that children's contributions should be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (UNCRC, 1989, pg.5). Lastly, data gathering and analysis which goes to answering Question 4 will seek to explore, from the perspective of teachers, the relational nature of agency in the processes of participation, and which facets of the complex communication systems which house interactions between children and teachers facilitate or prevent agentic participation.

Research Design

With these research questions and the review of literature concerning agency and participation in mind, a mixed-methods survey was designed which gathered quantitative and qualitative data relating to the experiences and practices of teachers.

This mixed method approach was adopted to address the research questions this study was designed to explore, and not with any specific allegiance to an epistemological paradigm, encouraging an approach to research which addresses gaps in knowledge freely and creatively (Kelle and Reith, 2023). This attitude was adopted, in part, as a response to the identification of a somewhat prescriptive, constructivist approach to the sociological research of childhood (Alanen, 2015).

In line with the post-humanist perspective identified during the review of literature on the subject of agency and participation in the sociology of childhood (and sociology more broadly), the participants were not asked to reflect solely on participatory interactions with children themselves, but also broader structural barriers which impact these interactions (Abebe, 2019; Spyrou, 2019). In order to achieve this in a manner that is appropriate to a study of this size it was decided that a questionnaire survey of teachers could provide insight into the practices of a selection of educators (Denscombe, 2017). This approach embraces an interpretivist attitude to research, acknowledging the complexity, variety, and subjectivity of teachers' experiences of encouraging and inhibiting participatory behaviour in children (Mason, 2018; Clark et al., 2021).

With this approach in mind, teachers can prove to be a valuable source of knowledge with insight into agency as it is carried out in the interaction as well as through the social structures surrounding them. Moreover, surveys allow them to conduct an anonymous and independent appraisal of their role in these processes, without the intrusion of a researcher or recording device required for participant observation or direct analysis of interaction (Clark et al., 2021).

Participants and Sampling

At the point at which this study was conceived, the participants were intended to be recruited from the body of teachers employed by an academy trust in West Yorkshire comprised of nineteen schools in the area, seventeen of which were primary schools, with two large secondary schools. This remained my intention until shortly after the proposed commencement of data collection, however a restructuring of the composition of the academy trust (in which it was to be combined with several others in

the area) contributed to a breakdown in communication between me and staff at the trust, from whom I had acquired permission to recruit from the teachers they employed. As a result, the actual process of contacting potential respondents via an email forwarded by the Communications Director to teaching staff was not carried out. Alternative means were devised for the recruitment of teachers to respond to the survey, in which the study was advertised via social media, and I directly contacted a number of teachers with whom I had a pre-existing relationship, inviting them to share the questionnaire with colleagues.

The sampling technique, although modified, remained purposive, in that qualified and practicing teachers were the sole participants sought. Instead of a pre-determined pool of potential participants from a selection of schools local to West Yorkshire, a 'snowball' approach to sampling was taken which relied on referrals from previous participants (Noy, 2008). An inherent advantage of this approach was greater variety in the location at which the respondents taught- and therefore greater variety in the communication systems this study could seek knowledge regarding (Denscombe, 2017; Clark et al., 2021). The approach taken shared some commonalities with the theoretical sampling adopted by studies seeking a grounded theoretical approach to research, such as the cumulative acquisition of participants, the deliberate selection of the respondents by the researcher, and flexibility on the part of the researcher, regarding the practical means by which respondents were acquired, as well as the size and composition of the pool of participants (Denscombe, 2017). The cumulative and selective sampling undertaken was not driven by the analysis of emerging theory derived from analysis of initial data, rather by a desire to gather sufficient data to respond to pre-determined research questions. In particular, in order to gather data satisfactory to answer Question 3, respondents were required who taught a range of age groups. As a result, this sampling was not theoretical and the approach taken was not one of grounded theory, nevertheless some of the features and advantages of both were experienced in this project (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

While this was not my preferred method for recruitment of participants (to be discussed further in the 'Limitations' section of this chapter), an adequate number of responses was acquired to provided indicative answers to the research questions, with 33

respondents, 15 of whom taught in primary schools, 16 teaching in secondary schools and 2 in sixth form colleges.

Data Collection

The tool by which data was gathered was a questionnaire completed by respondents online. This approach allowed the teachers participating, who work under considerable pressure and with significant demands on their time, to participate more easily and conveniently (Bradburn et al., 2004). Additionally, the requirement of the research design that some quantitative data be gathered to contribute to answering Research Questions 1 & 3, made a questionnaire survey the most practical choice as both could be gathered simultaneously without the need for multiple data collection tools (Clark et al., 2021).

The questionnaire was comprised of two parts, the first of which sought to elicit responses which would generate data suitable to answering Research Questions 1 & 3 regarding the extent of the teachers' awareness of the UNCRC and the age of the children with whom they work. This section consisted of four questions generating numerical data relating to the length of the respondents teaching career, the age of the children with whom they work, and a Likert-type question concerning their level of familiarity with the UNCRC (1989). The brevity of this section reflected the qualitative dominance of this study, in which the numerical data and quantitative analysis can be considered 'complimentary' to its primary, qualitative focus (Greene et al., 1998). This balance between the two forms of analysis was intended to explore both the phenomenological accounts of the teachers regarding their experiences and approaches to participation in schools, as well as their attitudes and inclinations toward the topic of participation and the role of the communication system in which interactions take place.

Prior to the second section of the questionnaire, the summaries of Articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRC (1989)[1] were presented to the participants, to allow those to whom the articles were new to familiarise themselves with children's participation rights. The

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[1] See Appendix for a copy of the questionnaire, including the summaries of Articles 12 & 13 presented to teachers

introduction of this page arose after initial piloting of the survey, done with three primary school teachers, which revealed that the questions alone occasionally led to responses regarding simple involvement in school activities, as opposed to agentic participation in decision making as presented in the UNCRC.

Following this, section two consisted of 8 questions, four of which were 5-point Likert-type questions in which teachers indicated the strength of their agreement with a series of statements, an effective means of numerically expressing the attitude of respondents regarding the given phenomenon (Gee, 2015). These statements pertained to teacher's consideration of children's participation rights when planning lessons, children's ability to participate in decision making in schools, whether children are given the chance to do so at the time of response, and the level of control teachers feel they have over facilitation of participation[2]. These questions elicited numerical data, analysis of which contributed, primarily, to the answering of Research Questions 2 & 4.

The remaining four questions contained in the second part of the questionnaire were open ended and followed a Likert-type question on the same theme. This order was designed to encourage respondents to consider their attitudes regarding a given aspect of participation, then elaborate on it in the longer form, open questions which sought qualitative data regarding all four research questions, but primarily Questions 2 & 4. The composition of the second section of the questionnaire, consisting of a mixture of closed and open questions, allowed for ease of analysis of attitudes based on numerical data as well as more in-depth exploration of the phenomena under review, utilising the experience and expertise of the respondents concerning participation in the interaction and the communication system (Bradburn et al., 2004).

Data Analysis

The mixed method approach to this study calls for multiple forms of analysis. Data gathered to answer Research Question 1 required simple, univariate, descriptive, quantitative analysis, in which responses to a single question were expressed as frequency tables to examine the extent of knowledge regarding the UNCRC among the teachers surveyed (Mujis, 2011). For analysis pertinent to Question 3, respondents were

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[2] See Appendix

asked to indicate the age group they teach. This data was grouped in different ways according to the nature of the analysis being undertaken, though generally analysis relied on grouping teachers into primary school, secondary school, and sixth form groups. These groups consisted of ordinal categorical variables and were, as a result, used in contingency tables which examined the relationship between the age of the student taught and responses to attitudinal Likert-type questions- also an ordinal variable (Blaikie, 2003). Using this approach responses were compared to establish the presence of relationships between the age of the children taught and the teachers' attitudes to children's participation rights, such as their capacity to be involved in decision making.

Additional statistical analysis involved using the data gathered to answer Research Question 1 in the same way, as the independent variable in contingency tables utilised to explore correlations between respondents' familiarity with the UNCRC and their beliefs about participation.

The frequency and contingency tables produced for statistical analysis pertinent to Research Questions 1 & 3 were compared and contrasted with qualitative analysis of open questions in the survey. Following attitudinal Likert-type questions teachers were asked a related, open, question and asked to give examples. Thematic analysis of these responses involved reading responses, codifying substantive statements, assigning these codes to categories of response based on their relevance to research questions, and finally labelling these categories to establish themes identified in multiple responses (Braun and Clarke, 2004). This approach applied most directly to Research Questions 2 & 4 concerning the nature of teachers practice, the impact of the UNCRC on their approach to teaching and their perception of barriers to the implementation of children's participation rights. Thematic analysis of open questions played a role in answering each of the research questions, however, as depth and nuance was supplied to the statistical data gathered for answering Research Questions 1 & 3.

Ethics

A study of this nature is relatively uncomplicated ethically, with the omission of children from the research design and the decision to review professionals' attitudes and practices, the study did not seek any vulnerable participants and limited sensitive data.

Nevertheless, the informed consent of the participants is a primary concern when conducting social research. This was gathered at the point of entry into the questionnaire, with respondents being made aware of how their data will be used, protected and anonymised prior to them indicating consent (BSA, 2017). The right to withdraw or ask questions concerning the project or how their data will be treated is also a consistent feature of social research with human participants (BERA, 2018). Due to the anonymisation of responses, the right to withdraw from the study could not be exercised after submittal, this was, however, made clear to the participants in a message that was presented to them at the end of the survey. Alongside this message were the researcher's contact details, should they wish to ask any questions before summitting their responses.

All participants' contributions were anonymised. No identifying data such as their names or the schools at which they worked were requested. In this report, where responses are quoted, the use of pseudonyms ensure anonymity, as is standard in research, particularly that which takes places in education settings (BERA, 2018). Much of the analysis that takes place in this report, particularly as it pertains to Research Questions 1 &3, will be carried out with reference to general trends in responses, contributing to individual anonymity. Where specific reference to responses does take place, numbers have been assigned to participants and may be accompanied by information pertinent to the analysis, without identifying the respondent, for example "Respondent 12 (Primary School teacher, Year 5) observed the following...".

Data contributed to this project was protected by being transferred to, and stored on, a password protected and encrypted University of Leeds 'OneDrive' account and deleted from personal computer hard drives (BERA, 2018. BSA, 2017).

A final, ethical consideration made was the importance of considering the impact the research had on its respondents (BERA, 2018). It was not the goal of this research to criticise, even implicitly, the knowledge or practice of the teachers who participated in this study. To this end, materials used to advertise the project such as emails, posters and social media posts were phrased with the intention of making the goals of the project clear, namely the exploration of the practices of a selection of teachers in relation to participation rights, not the assessment of their performance or quality as educators. Similarly, questions contained in the questionnaire were presented in a way that aimed to elicit honest and open reflection from teachers, but which acknowledged an awareness on the part of the researcher that teachers operate under significant structural and personal pressure. That teachers cannot always devote the time they would like to every facet of a child's education was understood prior to the commencement of this project and need not be attributed to the individuals who operate in these settings.

Limitations

As discussed, the recruitment of participants for this research project was not carried out in the manner initially planned. This led to a pool of participants whose characteristics differed from that which was expected. The composition of the academy trust was such that a larger proportion of primary school educators was expected, as opposed to the nearly even split which was achieved. This, although not in itself a negative outcome, meant that some areas of analysis were not allowed for in the survey design as they were expected to be of less consequence. For example, the subject taught by secondary school teachers was found to be an important factor in the construction of the complex communication system to which respondents referred. However, teachers were not asked to detail the subject they teach as primary school teachers generally teach all subjects and were expected to be the primary respondents. Future research from a similar perspective may seek to explore the impact of the subject taught as well as the age of the student, and this would be more explicitly considered within the data gathering tool.

Another limitation in the design of this survey related to sampling of participants was that initially it was planned that the experience level of the teacher would be analysed. Data was gathered related to this, but the vast majority of participants had 11+ years of teaching experience and very few inexperienced teachers were reached. This can perhaps be attributed to the 'snowball' approach to sampling in which respondents passed the survey onto similarly experienced peers and a full spectrum could not be achieved.

Finally, inherent limitations of research of this size should be acknowledged. As previously discussed, research which considers the complex communication system of the school, and the participatory interactions which are achieved or not, would lend itself to broader, longitudinal research. This may include multiple data gathering methods such as video recordings of interactions and interviews with actors in these systems of all kinds, including students and potentially administrators, as well as teachers.

Findings

Familiarity With the UNCRC

The teachers surveyed in this study reported a relatively low level of familiarity with the UNCRC and the provisions and rights it contains (see Figure 1). Of the 33 respondents, just under half (16) indicated that they were only somewhat familiar with the convention. A further eight respondents indicated that they were 'not so familiar' with the convention, with four respondents stating that they had not heard of the UNCRC at all.

Figure 1- Frequency Table Showing Respondents' Familiarity with the UNCRC

Have not heard of	4	12.1
Not so familiar	8	24.2
Somewhat familiar	16	48.5
Very familiar	2	6.1
Extremely familiar	3	9.1

There was no obvious correlation between the level of reported familiarity with the UNCRC and the age group or type of school at which the teachers taught, with a fairly equal mix of responses throughout the age range. However, of the 5 respondents who reported being very or extremely familiar with the UNCRC, four taught in primary schools (see Figure 2). No teachers of children in Years 7-11 reported being anything more than 'somewhat' familiar with the convention (see Figure 3). This trend of greater familiarity among educators of younger children is contrasted by the finding that half of those who had never heard of the convention were primary school teachers, as were three of the eight respondents who were 'not so' familiar with it. Of the 12 responses of 'not so familiar' or 'never heard of', seven came from teachers of secondary school age children, however such a small majority is not particularly striking and can likely be attributed to the slightly higher response rate among teachers of this age group.

Figure 2- Familiarity With UNCRC * School Type Crosstabulation

		School Type			
		Primary School	Secondary School	Sixth Form	Total
Familiarity With UNCRC	Have not heard of	2	2	0	4
	Not so familiar	3	5	0	8
	Somewhat familiar	6	8	2	16
	Very familiar	2	0	0	2
	Extremely familiar	2	1	0	3
Total		15	16	2	33

When called upon to provide examples of participation in the interaction or in lesson planning, no teachers referred specifically to the UNCRC, suggesting that the relatively low levels of awareness of the convention mean it does not figure highly in teachers perception of participation in schools. This remains true among respondents who indicated high levels of familiarity, suggesting that increased awareness of the UNCRC itself does not necessarily impact the practice or viewpoints of teachers concerning children's agency at school.

Figure 3- Familiarity With UNCRC * Age Groups Crosstabulation

		Age Groups				
		Primary School	Years 7-11	Years 7-13	Years 12 & 13	Total
Familiarity With UNCRC	Have not heard of	2	1	1	0	4
	Not so familiar	3	1	4	0	8
	Somewhat familiar	6	2	6	2	16
	Very familiar	2	0	0	0	2
	Extremely familiar	2	0	0	1	3
Total		15	4	11	3	33

Participation Rights in Planning

When asked the extent to which they agree with the statement, "When I plan lessons, I consider children's participation rights", the majority of respondents indicated tentative agreement, with 18 of the 33 stating that they 'somewhat agree'. A further three disagreed with this statement, with seven agreements and five strongly agreeing.

For several respondents, the facilitation of agency in learning came from offering a number of activities from which the child could choose in a given lesson. Respondent 2 (Year 1 teacher) stated that they

"...try to give the children opportunities to decide how they work and what aspect of a subject they are interested in pursuing. This might mean choosing whether to create a dance or a role play in RE or create a story map or zig-zag book to show their understanding of a Bible story..."

Similarly, Respondent 1 "tr[ies] to leave planning open ended where I can so students can decide how they want to do something".

Another theme identified in responses related to planning is the employment of strategies designed to encourage students to share their views in smaller groups before being invited to share them with the class. Nine respondents referred to building

opportunities for working in smaller groups into their lesson plans, to encourage the elicitation of children's views. These included the use of "turn and talk" in which students will discuss ideas with peers, or "think-pair-share", a similar tool with the added step of individual thinking time and explicit reference to sharing with the class (Cooper et al., 2021; Hindman et al., 2022). These responses suggest that teachers consider peer interactions as important in the facilitation of participation in the classroom, and that a considerable portion of their planning in advance of interactions is devoted to facilitation of this kind, as opposed to the planning of teacher-student interactions.

Reduced emphasis on teacher-student interactions as the focus of participatory planning can be seen in the number of responses which emphasised classroom culture as productive of opportunities for agency. This came primarily in reference to specific subjects being regarded as organically more participatory. Respondent 24 (sixth form college teacher), for example, did not specifically mention any planned activities or approaches designed to facilitate, and somewhat agreed with the statement that they consider participation rights in planning, but acknowledged that students

"have freedom to choose the materials and ideas they'd like to work with within their art coursework... [p]articipation within my subject (art and design) is a necessity so they are able to actively participate and make decisions in each session".

Three other teachers referred to PSHCE (Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education- or PSHE where Citizenship is omitted) as being naturally facilitative as students are regularly invited to adopt and advocate for perspectives of their choosing in debates. Each of these responses concerning subject specific inclination toward facilitation instead of planning to that end from the teacher came from secondary school or sixth form teachers. This finding indicates that secondary school teachers of certain disciplines may operate in communication systems more easily suited to the facilitation of participation.

It should also be acknowledged that several respondents referred to the use of techniques in their planning which seemed to relate more to the encouragement of involvement in learning activities among their students, as opposed to participation as

the right to involvement in decision making. For example, Respondent 6, (a secondary school teacher), who disagreed with the statement concerning participation rights in planning, referred to their school's "'no opt out' mantra whereby all students are expected to answer questions and cannot simply say that they don't know." This response refers to a policy designed to increase engagement among students which could be argued to limit their agency in decision making, as they "cannot" decide how they engage with a prompt or learning activity. Respondents 16 & 17 (secondary school teachers who disagreed and somewhat agreed that they consider participation rights in planning) also referred to "cold calling" on students. This is a practice in which teachers do not ask for volunteers to answer questions but choose children at random to increase engagement among students less inclined to vocally involve themselves in lessons. These responses suggest that agentic participation is occasionally conflated with practices which, while well intentioned and potentially valuable in engaging quieter or less confident students, actually present students with situations in which they have thin or no opportunities for agentic decision making.

A relationship was identified between familiarity with the UNCRC and agreement with the suggestion that participation rights are considered by teachers when planning lessons (see Figure 4). Of those who had not heard of the UNCRC, only a quarter agreed that they consider participation rights in lesson planning, while none who were very or extremely familiar with the convention disagreed, and only one of the five 'somewhat agreed'. The fact that no responses to open questions concerning planning referred to the UNCRC or the rights of children, despite this correlation, suggests that while the provisions of the UNCRC do not actively guide the respondents' lesson planning, there is a general inclination among those familiar with the UNCRC to consider children's participation rights, and a disinclination to do so among those not familiar with it.

Figure 4- Participation Rights in Planning * Familiarity with UNCRC Crosstabulation

		Familiarity With UNCRC					
		Have not heard of	Not so familiar	Somewhat familiar	Very familiar	Extremely familiar	Total
Participation rights in planning	Disagree	1	0	2	0	0	3
	Somewhat agree	2	6	9	1	0	18
	Agree	0	1	4	1	1	7
	Strongly agree	1	1	1	0	2	5
Total		4	8	16	2	3	33

Capacity & Opportunities for Decision Making

The majority of respondents agreed that their students are capable of participating in decision making at school (see Figure 5). 21 of 33 agreed or strongly agreed with this statement and only one disagreed. Agreement narrowed somewhat in the middle when the age of the pupils taught was considered (see Figures 6 & 7). Primary school educators showed nearly universal agreement, as did Sixth Form teachers, although the low number or respondents who taught exclusively in this age bracket precludes the drawing of too many conclusions on the basis of their responses. Nevertheless, the responses of secondary school educators who taught Years 7-11 were decidedly more cautious in their belief that children are capable of fulfilling their participation rights at school. This pattern was reflected in responses to open questions, in which Respondents 24 and 26 suggest that Sixth Forms and Early Years settings are inherently more participatory spaces- "being in post 16 education is in itself a decision the child is making, they have chosen to attend in the first place and choose whether to attend lessons…" (R24) "children in EYFS are given lots of time to make decisions. This is part and parcel of our EY curriculum. They can chose (sic) the areas in which they want to explore…" (R26).

Figure 5- Capacity to Participate Frequency Table

	Frequency	Percent
Disagree	1	3.0
Somewhat agree	11	33.3
Agree	14	42.4
Strongly agree	7	21.2
Total	33	100.0

Secondary school teachers were more likely to argue that opportunities for participation were limited. Respondent 19 stated that "they do not [participate]. Content is decided by the curriculum and participation isn't optional" and Respondent 23 felt that "[s]tudents are not really given much autonomy at my school, however I do try and incorporate choices into my lessons...". Where autonomy was exemplified by secondary school teachers in their responses it was at times portrayed as being exercised in opposition with the school, Respondents 6 and 12 cited occasions in which students have encouraged changes to uniform policy which were enacted.

Although less common, there are examples of times that students have petitioned for something and have been listened to by the SLT and governors-informing change. A good recent example of this is uniform changes that have come about from a letter written by a year 9 student.

(Respondent 12).

Figure 6- Children's Capacity * School Type Crosstabulation

		School type group		Total
		Primary School	Secondary (inc 6th form)	
Children's capacity	Disagree	0	1	1
	Somewhat agree	2	9	11
	Agree	9	5	14
	Strongly agree	4	3	7
Total		15	18	33

Figure 7- Children's capacity * Age Groups Crosstabulation

Count

		Age Groups 3				
		Primary School	Years 7-11	Years 7-13	Years 12 & 13	Total
Children's capacity	Disagree	0	1	0	0	1
	Somewhat agree	2	2	7	0	11
	Agree	9	0	4	1	14
	Strongly agree	4	1	0	2	7
Total		15	4	11	3	33

A common example cited in this study of a space in which decision making was accessible to students were school councils. 12 responses referred to them as examples of areas where children are encouraged to participate. This finding was consistent across the age range, cited equally by primary and secondary school teachers.

A further finding was the notion that the main way in which children can exercise agency in interactions was to choose to behave in a way approved by teachers. As with participation as considered in planning, some examples appeared to limit opportunities for choice but were nevertheless characterised as ways participation was encouraged- "Behaviour is framed around choice – 'if you choose to do this, then you will receive a detention'" (R15, Secondary school). Although in this instance some respondents acknowledged that whether or not to behave as expected, while an example of choice, does not align perfectly with the spirit of the UNCRC- "the only example that really come to mind now are mainly making decisions around changes in behaviour and making choices around what the outcome is (not a great example in relation to the UN though)" (R8, secondary school). Compliance in behaviour and other choices encountered by students during the school day as an example of thin agency was also referred to by Respondent 13 (primary school) who claimed that students "make decisions all the time based on what options they take, what food they eat, but a lot of their decisions are limited or there is a "right and wrong" especially when it comes to the way they behave".

On the whole teachers, secondary school teachers in particular, identified very few aspects of school life in which children have anything but thin access to agentic decision making.

Teacher's Role

When asked the extent to which they agree with the statement "I decide whether or not children have opportunities for participation in the classroom" the majority of respondents agreed, with 22 of 33 agreeing or strongly agreeing and none indicating disagreement (see Figure 8). This suggests that the teachers surveyed feel responsibility for and control over the facilitation of agentic participation in the classroom. This remained consistent across the age range, with around a third of primary and secondary school teachers somewhat agreeing and the rest agreeing or strongly agreeing that they decide whether children have opportunities for participation (see Figure 9).

Figure 8- Frequency Table Showing Respondents' Reported Control Over Participation

	Frequency	Percent
Somewhat agree	11	33.3
Agree	17	51.5
Strongly agree	5	15.2
Total	33	100.0

Despite this consensus teachers were consistently able to identify barriers to participation beyond their control, and more closely associated with policy makers, the senior leadership team (SLT) of the school, or qualities and behaviours associated with their students. 13 respondents, for example, referenced the National Curriculum when asked to discuss what might prevent a teacher from introducing more opportunities for participation. Respondent 5 (a Year 2 teacher) pointed out that teachers "are curtailed by the demands of the National Curriculum and the expectations from the government which is directive and time constraining. Children have to know a lot in a short space of

time". Demands on teachers' time made by the National Curriculum were argued by Respondent 30 (a Year 1 teacher) to be "compounded by summative assessment and scrutiny of teachers" meaning that "teachers feel they need to keep tight control over every lesson. ... There is now an explicit expectation that we can 'say with confidence' what a child will have learnt (and will retain) from every lesson we teach." The nature of the curriculum in given subjects was also discussed. R13 (secondary school) pointed out that "[a]s a teacher of Science, I have a huge amount of content to get through in a relatively short time. We use a knowledge-based curriculum... This does not always lend itself well to giving students lots of time to participate in choice-based activities". The need to control the flow or outcomes of a lesson in order to comply with the demands of the curriculum was a common refrain in the findings of this study.

Figure 9- Teacher's Control of Participation * School Type Crosstabulation

| | | School Type | | | |
		Primary School	Secondary School	Sixth Form	Total
Teacher's control participation	Somewhat agree	5	5	1	11
	Agree	9	8	0	17
	Strongly agree	1	3	1	5
Total		15	16	2	33

Not all teachers who discussed demands on learning time, however, attributed this to the curriculum. R20 (a secondary school teacher) was one of seven to point out that children's classroom behaviour restricts the time that can be allocated to giving children choice concerning their learning; "[p]oor behaviour which would affect the learning within the classroom... it is difficult to balance the behaviour of all students with opportunities to give opinions". Some respondents did consider this factor to be, at least to some extent, within the control of the teacher, referring to "behaviour

management" (R9, secondary school), a quality held by the teacher as opposed to action on the part of pupils.

Six respondents referred to 'SLT' in their answer concerning barriers to further opportunities for participation, though none expanded beyond R23's point that "pressure from SLT to follow the whole school way of doing things" is a barrier. R29's again referred vaguely to "demands from senior leadership" without further explication. How this pressure is exerted and what the "school way of doing things" is, was not explored and may merit further exploration in future research of this nature.

Among those who agreed that they control opportunities for participation, three argued that increased agency among pupils is not desirable and that this is the main barrier to their encouraging it. The first of these, R14 (secondary school), argued that something which might prevent participation in a given lesson is-

"Whether there is a desired outcome. Not every action in a school day is an opportunity for students to change the outcome... there are sensitive topics in society that some may not be mature enough to fully understand the complexities of, thus could just repeat the things they hear at home."

Here the respondent appears to reject the assumption that agency among pupils is necessarily something which should be encouraged, as well as calling into question the ability of the children they teach to comprehend or contribute effectively to decision making processes. R16 argued similarly that children's grasp of sensitive topics such as consent would cause "misunderstandings that can lead to misconceptions" if too participatory an approach was taken to Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE). R23 suggested that in addition to the priorities of SLT "[f]ear that giving the students an option in how they learn could derail the lesson or cause disruption" was a factor in preventing agentic participation in learning.

A teacher who 'somewhat agreed' that they controlled opportunities for participation, R18 (a Design Technology teacher in a secondary school), pointed out that health and safety concerns make freedom of choice among pupils potentially dangerous when "using a variety of various tools and machinery, I need to be able to have an overarching final say on how they conduct themselves". R18 contrasted this with the design area of

their subject, where decision-making among students "is paramount… the students have a huge say in their projects that they want to design and make and therefore work together with me". This response highlights the variety of social settings contained between and within subject specific learning spaces in secondary schools and argues that the balance between safety and agency can dictate the extent of agentic participation in a classroom.

Discussion

Role of the UNCRC

Research Questions 1 and 2 related directly to the role the UNCRC plays in the practice of teachers surveyed for this study. The achievement of Article 42 of the convention, which stipulates that children and adults should be made aware of the convention and its contents and the achievement of the participation rights contained in Articles 12 and 13 of the convention, were under review. The perspective of teachers on this role appears to be that the convention, directly at least, has very limited impact on their practice. Familiarity with the convention was low and contributions concerning planning, children's capacity to participate and their access to decision making arenas contained no references to the UNCRC. Nevertheless, the identification of correlations between familiarity with the rights contained in the UNCRC and positive responses to attitudinal Likert-type questions related to these themes would suggest that the UNCRC does have impact of some description. Where the UNCRC is familiar to teachers, they are, in this case study at least, more likely to consider children's right to participate in planning and more likely to believe that children are capable of playing an active role in decision making. This would suggest that future work which seeks to encourage children's participation rights in schools might seek to assess the role of the UNCRC in teacher training and continued professional development, as a means to increase their familiarity with the rights contained in the convention. Additionally, research which assesses the complex communication system of the school as a whole, not just teacher's perspective on it, might consider the presence or absence of the language of the UNCRC in the communications between teachers and other staff in schools. This will serve the dual purpose of establishing more firmly whether there is a link between awareness of the UNCRC and realisation of participation rights, and establishing the mechanisms which lead this awareness to impacting the participatory nature of interactions housed by the school.

The notion that a conceptual vagueness surrounding the notion of participation contributes to the difficulty in realising children's rights to it was borne out in this study

(Perry-Hazan and Somech, 2023). The conflation of participation as effective contribution to decision making in school and simple engagement in learning activities which was identified in responses when piloting the research tool, while mitigated by the introduction of summaries of Articles 12 and 13 to the questionnaire, persisted in responses during data collection for analysis. This evidence further suggests that familiarity with the contents of the UNCRC is low among the teachers surveyed and that a potential avenue for the enhancement of children's rights would be to establish a clear understanding of participation, distinct from engagement, among teachers and in the culture and communication system of the school. As is the case when considering familiarity with the convention itself, there could well be value in researching the language and culture related to conversations within schools regarding topics such as 'pupil voice', 'participation' and 'engagement'. Research which considers the complex communication system of the school in its entirety might seek to explore further how participation is understood throughout the communication of the school, and what impact this has at the level of interaction with children.

Arenas for Participation

Mannion et al. (2022) posited that the formal curriculum, and the timetabled lessons they give rise to, was one potential arena to which examples of participation in research could be assigned. The findings of this study indicated that opportunities for participation as part of timetabled classrooms were very limited. A theme which emerged which relates to arenas for participation, which was not explicitly sought within the design of this study, was the notion that teachers of certain secondary school subjects feel that theirs is naturally suited to the participatory involvement of the students- in this case these subjects included Art and Design, Design Technology, PSHCE and RSHE. Similarly, some teachers felt that the curriculum as it relates to their work was particularly constraining, with a science teacher reporting a specific pressure in their subject as a result of its influence. Future research may explicitly seek to explore the boundaries between subjects and the different perceptions of barriers between subject areas. If some subjects are found to be more conducive arenas of participation, research which establishes why this is the case may allow for the adoption of practices

within those subjects in others, encouraging a more naturally occurring culture of participation within the confines of the formal curriculum.

Some examples were identified which could be characterised as part of the wider curriculum, where students can shape the school environment outside of lessons, such as in contribution to fundraising ideas (Mannion et al., 2022). The dominant example of involvement in decision making was, however, school councils, belonging to the category that Mannion et al. (2022, pg.32) termed "decision making groups". School councils are often held up as examples of participatory spaces which offer thin opportunities for agentic decision making. Struthers (2016, pg.457) for example, in their comparable research to this project wherein teachers were interviewed to explore children's access to participation rights in schools, found that teachers themselves characterised school councils in terms that led the researcher to describe them as a "tokenistic" or "decorative practice". While no examples were found in this study of "manipulative" employment of school councils in which educators introduce ideas through school councils to give the appearance that they originated through pupil voice, the findings of this study appeared to corroborate that of Struthers (2016, pg.459). This study found that even respondents who did not feel that pupils are given opportunities for participation in their schools referred to school councils as examples of participatory spaces. It is also noteworthy that while they were often referred to, and occasionally described in positive terms as participatory spaces, no examples were provided of students influencing a specific decision occurring at school through work carried out in school councils.

In their research design, Mannion et al. (2022) assigned the label "connections with the wider community" to the 'other' category left open in their research design to allow for theory to emerge from responses. The study conducted here found no examples of decision making processes which conformed to this arena, however some examples which do not easily fit into the first three groups were identified. Respondents pointed to examples where pupils took independent action to influence school uniform policy. This example of agentic action and participation in decisions within the school environment can be better described as action taken in opposition to, or at least without the influence or permission of, educators. The fact that this occurred in multiple responses,

and so few examples of participatory spaces outside of school councils were identified, might suggest that concerted efforts to establish participatory spaces is not the way to achieve the rights established in the UNCRC. A culture or environment in which students feel empowered to independently raise concerns such as these may be a more effective approach than decision making groups which are so subject to adult constraint or participation through the national curriculum, which this study and many others have found to be extremely limiting to teachers and pupils alike. How best to facilitate such an environment remains to be established, though research which focuses on facilitative interactions seems a logical starting point, if the goal is to overcome the barriers imposed by the curriculum and the prevention of the allotment of time and resources to specifically participatory spaces or activities.

Children's Age

The findings related to the age group taught by the respondents were less stark than predicted. Included in the UNCRC is the notion that access to decision making should be commensurate with the age and maturity of the child, suggesting that as children get older, input in decision making should increase. While it was observed in quantitative analysis of this dataset that teachers reported higher levels of capacity and opportunities for decision making in their students at the oldest and youngest ends of the spectrum, generally speaking results were consistent across the age ranges. This is particularly true in open-ended questions where all of the identified themes could be evidenced in primary and secondary schools. It may be the case that the impact of external examinations, carried out more frequently in secondary schools, negates the incremental increase in contribution suggested by the UNCRC, though this conclusion would be beyond the scope of this study and would require more focussed analysis on this factor alone. Alternatively, one could argue that this study suggests that across the education system, regardless of age, the barriers to participation identified herein are the dominant factor in children's access to participatory spaces, and their capacity, increasing or not, is rendered immaterial.

A finding of this study which may merit further exploration can be seen in the contributions from early years and sixth form teachers. Their responses indicated- and explicitly argued- that these education settings naturally facilitate more easily than secondary schools and later years in primary schools. The low numbers of respondents in these age ranges cautions against the drawing of too many conclusions but may suggest that direct comparison between one or both of these age groups and the main school bodies from which they branch, might yield valuable insights into what aspects of a complex communication system make it facilitative or constraining.

Barriers to Participation

Children's behaviour has been framed as either the product of the imposition of structural forces exerted on passive children, or as an innate and independent act of agentic will (Koomson et al., 2022). This study indicated that teachers feel that they control the extent of children's participation, while pointing to several other influencing factors external to the child which dictate their actions in the learning process. These viewpoints represent a rejection of the notion that children creatively and independently choose their course of action at school. Nevertheless, examples were cited of children doing exactly this, as well as examples of participatory spaces in schools and aspects of the learning process, albeit ones which can be described as relatively thin. Overall, therefore, respondents appear to characterise children as in possession of the ability to behave unpredictably and independently of the goals of social structures, while characterising the complex communication system of the school as inherently limiting.

Baraldi (2022 pg.42) argues that the main form of interaction which takes place between teachers and students can be characterised as "conveyance". The role of teachers is to possess and convey knowledge to students, reflecting a power dynamic in the interaction in which adults have elevated status. The results of this survey reaffirm this characterisation. Respondents identified situations in which they felt students' knowledge or beliefs about a topic were not desirable, stating instead that they should impart the correct perspective onto their pupils. More still suggested pupils' role in the interaction was often a disruptive influence on the pattern of conveyance. This study

found significant evidence that the teachers surveyed wish to retain control over the learning process and in interactions with children. Lundy (2007) and others, correctly on the basis of the evidence gathered here, point out that teachers' beliefs about children's capacity, fear over loss of control and low prioritisation of participation as a goal in education are key barriers to the realisation of children's right to participate. This perspective and some of the evidence presented here might lead one to conclude that teachers and their approach to interactions with children are themselves barriers to children's access to participation. However, Baraldi's (2022) characterisation of agency as unpredictability of action and evidence of the demands on teachers to demonstrate clear, linear progress in their students from unfamiliarity with a given subject area to knowledge in it, makes the need to maintain a highly predictable course of action in each lesson perfectly understandable.

The respondents' descriptions of external pressure which limits the achievement of participation suggests that teachers derive their role in schooling as much from the influences of the complex communication system of the school as children do. Moreover, they adopt these positions despite evidence of a general belief in the ability of children to participate, a belief which increases as familiarity with the UNCRC does. The regularity with which teachers suggested that the National Curriculum and associated assessments were too onerous a demand on teaching time to allow for focus elsewhere exemplifies the fact that teachers' approaches to learning are not determined by their beliefs about childhood or participation. Some also pointed to the demands of senior leadership at the school and others identified school policies around child behaviour which limited choice. What emerged in the analysis of these differing but related challenges was significant evidence that teachers occupy a highly pressurised position, in which they are required to balance the competing priorities of a great many stakeholders in the education of children, most of which do not originate in the wishes or perspectives of children themselves.

This study was able to invite teachers to reflect not just on the interaction but on the surrounding communication system and as such generates knowledge on the origins of teachers' approach to children's participation rights. No respondents suggested that they sought to maintain the 'conveyance' structure out of an inexplicable preference to

have control over their students and the majority were able to point to real and significant pressures, chiefly from the curriculum and assessments, which necessitated predictable and measurable conveyance of knowledge. Teachers are, one might argue, in a position where their actions cannot be unpredictable, and their agency is inhibited, but responsibility for creating unpredictability in interactions with children remains theirs. One possible avenue for the facilitation of agentic participation may be to free teachers of this responsibility though school-wide adoption of policies and practices which encourage thick opportunities for choice among children. For example, a general expectation that children will decide the course of their learning- as found in responses from teachers working in subjects incorporating design- may reduce pressure on teachers to satisfy the many demands placed on them as well as the challenge of doing so in a way that gives children choices.

It is clear that in the opinion of the teachers surveyed here, the removal, or reassessment of the most significant barrier identified in this study, the National Curriculum, is the avenue by which the realisation of children's participation rights can best achieved. Teachers' position in this study as actors in the communication system of the school with expertise in teacher-student interactions and the structural impact of the education system make this a forceful conclusion, and one which merits further investigation in research, particularly that which assesses schools as a complete communication system, rather than the perspectives of a set of actors within it.

Conclusion

This project set out to establish the place of the children's participation rights in the practice and perspective of teachers. To achieve this, teachers were invited to reflect on whether their schools were or contained participatory spaces, and to reflect on how they attempt to incorporate opportunities for agentic decision making into their lessons. Combining these insights with information regarding the respondents' familiarity with the UNCRC, the age of the children they teach, and their beliefs about children's capacity to participate, teachers' role in the facilitation of agentic participation could be explored.

With regard to the age of the children, there was limited variety. Findings were consistent across the age range, suggesting that the fact that so few examples of participatory spaces or practices in schools were identified was caused by factors outside of children's capacity to be involved in them. A different potential cause for the lack of participation in schools was the low levels of familiarity with the UNCRC reported by respondents to this survey. While positive relationships existed between being familiar with children's rights and belief in their capacity to contribute to decisions which affect them at school, the UNCRC does not, on the basis of this study, play a significant role in the work of teachers or in their interactions with students. Future efforts to give greater access to decision making in schools to children, might seek to address this through teacher training, establishing a clear understanding of the UNCRC and its participation rights that is distinct from the somewhat vaguer notions of 'pupil voice' and student engagement.

A clear finding of this study was that, regardless of the role of the UNCRC, the complex communication system of the school, outside of the interaction between teachers and students in the classroom, inherently constricts the practice of teachers, including their facilitation of agentic participation. The need for predictability in learning interactions often renders the efforts of teachers and students, when seeking a more collaborative or equal working relationship, ineffective. The barriers to agentic decision making in children's education were found to be ingrained into the communication system of the school, with many of the influencing factors outside of teacher-student interactions in classrooms explicitly or implicitly exerting pressure onto said interactions and

encouraging them to be predictable paths to demonstrable learning. These pressures limit children directly, through policies related to their behaviour, as well as teachers, through cultures and policies which prioritise progress in assessment and in accordance with the demands of the curriculum. This leads one to the conclusion that efforts to increase agentic participation through dedicated decision making groups or participatory spaces will be insufficient in efforts to resist the deeply embedded desire for predictability that permeates the communication system of the school. More fundamental reassessment of how children learn, and, importantly, how we understand and measure their learning, may be required for the realisation of their UN afforded rights.

Future research which seeks to explore this should do so through consideration of the education system as a whole, including the perspectives of policy makers, administrators, senior leadership and- importantly- students themselves. Through this broader lens the findings of this study may well be corroborated, that schools in their current form inherently reward predictability and discourage agency. For thick, agentic participation to be achieved, this must be addressed either from a change in policy at a national level which removes the pressure caused by the curriculum, or through the measurement of learning which embraces unpredictability and creativity among its educators and learners.

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Appendix- Written copy of the online questionnaire used to gather data in this study

Page 1

Q1 - How long have you been a teacher? *

Less than a year

1 year

2 years

3 years

4 years

5 years

6 years

7 years

8 years

9 years

10 years

11+ years

Q2 - At what type of school do you teach? *

Primary School

Secondary School

Sixth Form College

Other (please specify):

Q3 - What year group do you teach?

Foundation Stage

Year 1

Year 2

Year 3

Year 4

Year 5

Year 6

Other (please specify):

Q4 - How familiar are you with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)? *

Extremely familiar- I have read the convention and can recall the articles it contains

Very familiar- I have read the convention and know broadly the rights it includes

Somewhat familiar- I have read or partially read the convention but would need to be reminded about specific articles and rights

Not so familiar- I have heard of or partially read the convention but I am not aware what it contains

I have not heard of it

Page 2

The following is taken from the summary of the UNCRC and describes the rights entailed in Articles 12 and 13 of the convention:

Article 12- Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This right applies at all times, for example during immigration proceedings, housing decisions or the child's day-to-day home life.
Article 13- Every child must be free to express their thoughts and opinions and to access all kinds of information, as long as it is within the law.

These articles contain children's 'participation rights'. For the purposes of this survey, when questions refer to 'participation', they refer to involvement in decision making, as described in the UNCRC, as opposed to simple involvement or engagement in learning activities.

Page 3

Q5 - To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "When I plan lessons I consider children's participation rights" *

Strongly Agree

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Q6 - How do you encourage children to share their views during learning lessons? Please give examples of occasions where you have encouraged participation as part of a lesson or planned activity

(Open question)

Q7 - To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"The children I teach are given opportunities to make decisions at school" *

Strongly Agree

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Q8 - In what ways are pupils encouraged to participate in decision making at school? Please give some examples, these may relate to any decisions the children participate in during the school day.

(Open question)

Q9 - To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"The children that I teach capable of participating in decision making at school?" *

Strongly Agree

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Q10 - What aspects of school life, if any, do you think might improve if children were given the chance to share their opinions about them?

(Open question)

Q11 - To what extent do you agree with the following statement?
"I decide whether or not children have opportunities for participation in the classroom" *

Strongly Agree

Agree

Somewhat Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Q12 - What would prevent a teacher from introducing more opportunities for children to participate in decision making in the classroom?

(Open question)

Page 3

Thank you for filling out this survey, your responses will be analysed and contribute to a research project preliminarily entitled "The impact of the UNCRC on children's participation rights in UK education: A mixed methods survey of teachers' awareness and application of participation rights in the classroom". Details of the purposes of this research and how your responses will be analysed can be found in the email or poster through which you accessed this survey.

By pressing the "Finish Survey" button you are sending your responses and indicating your consent to participate in this study. Due to anonymisation procedures you will be unable to withdraw your contributions after submitting, so please ensure your willingness to participate before continuing.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact the researcher at

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