

Adults' Endorsement of Children's Protection and Participation Rights and Likelihood of Reporting Abuse

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Abstract

Children's rights only serve their purpose in as far as they are recognised as rights by those who can exercise them. This study examined a sample of Irish adults' (predominantly students; n=83) perceptions of children's participation and protection rights across two age groups of children (seven- and 14-year-olds). Participants completed the Perceptions of Children's Rights Questionnaires and likelihood of reporting child abuse online. A within-groups four-factor ANOVA examined differences between the perceptions participation and protection rights across the two age categories. Participants endorsed protection rights more than participation rights for both age groups and reported a higher endorsement of protection rights and a lower endorsement of participation rights for seven-year-olds compared with 14-year-olds. Participants were more likely to report the abuse of a seven-year-old compared with a 14-year-old, and participants' endorsement of protection rights significantly predicted likelihood of re- porting abuse. These findings have implications for how children's rights are viewed in Irish society and how these rights may be enacted.

Keywords

Participation rights

Protection rights

Children

Adolescents

Reporting

Abuse

1. Introduction

As the concept of childhood has evolved, so too has society's concern with children's rights. Since the latter part of the 20th century, there has been a shift in the perception of children in need of protection to the idea that children have rights to their own lives (Ruck, Peterson-Badali & Day, 2002) and are capable of participating meaningfully in society. The current near-universal acceptance of children's rights as human rights has been justified by the 'capabilities approach' which argues that children's rights should be recognised as human rights, as every human being is entitled to respect for her/his full human dignity (Dixon & Nussbaum, 2012). Nonetheless, research suggests that adults' attitudes towards children's rights are not uniform (e.g., Day, Peterson-Badali, & Ruck, 2006). The aim of this current study is to investigate a subsample of Irish adults' endorsement of children's rights to participation and protection, and to examine how endorsement of such rights relate to an individual's response to a violation of such a right, specifically the perceived likelihood of reporting of suspected abuse.

A distinction can be made between the two general types of rights when considering the child: rights to protection and rights to participation (Lansdown, 1994; Peterson-Badali, Morine, Ruck & Slonim, 2004). Protection rights ensure children are safe, nurtured and legally protected and stress society's obligation to protect the child from harm and provide for what is in the best interest of the child (Cherney, Greteman & Travers, 2008; Wrightsman et al., 1975). Participation rights stress the importance of the child exercising some degree of control over his or her own life (Ruck & Horn, 2008; Ruck, Abramovitch, & Keating, 1998). Participation has been defined as an ongoing process of children's expression and active involvement in decision-making in matters that concern them (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014). Lansdown (2010) notes that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) refers to such rights as the right to express views freely and have them

taken seriously, the civil right to freedom of expression, religion, conscience, association and information, and the right to privacy; although she notes there exists some ambiguity regarding what is actually meant by participation in the wider context of the discourse on children's rights (Lansdown, 2010). Generally, such rights give children the 'right to decide what's good for themselves' (Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978, p.6) and are seen as key to the recognition of the child as a rights holder and agent of social change (Doek, 2019). Such rights are now an accepted norm among children's rights advocates (Plevin, 2019). Denial or restriction of participation rights is negatively associated with psychological health and adjustment (Way, Reddy & Rhodes, 2007). Indeed, self-determination theory holds that autonomy is a universal human need and necessary for optimal human functioning, and its violation can lead to poor psychological well-being regardless of social or cultural setting (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The rights of protection and participation are often seen as a continuum (Cherney, 2010) and the UNCRC attempts to weave together both protectionist and participatory elements. They have, however, the potential to conflict with one another (Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008). Indeed, there is a concern as to whether the extension of a child's participation rights is done at the expense of their protection rights (Doek, 2019; Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008; Ruck & Horn, 2008). Thus, there has been an increased emphasis on balancing a child's need for protection and their rights to participation (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2005; Day et al., 2006; Peleg, 2019; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004; Dixon & Nussbaum, 2012). Although children are entitled to protections associated with their youth and relative vulnerability, erring too far on the side of protection denies children the right to be heard, inhibits opportunities to develop their capacities for participation, and could also possible heighten their risk of harm (Lansdown, 2010).

Rights, however, only serve their purpose in as far as they are recognised as rights by those who exercise or fulfil them (Peterson-Badali et al., 2003). Therefore, it is important to consider children's rights in a society in which adult power and authority is considered absolute (Smith, 2007). Given their standing in society, children are very often unable to assert their own rights (Cherney & Shing, 2008; Peens & Louw, 2000), meaning someone other than the child often has to implement or advocate for the fulfilment these rights (Cherney et al., 2008; Doek, 2019; Hunt Federle, 2000; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004). For example, children's participation is often defined in terms of the roles that adults ascribe to them, such that the decision-making and contribution of children is frequently only facilitated through adult-initiated projects (Malone & Hartung, 2010). Thus, given the enabling role that adults play, how adults conceptualise children's rights is crucial to their implementation and success of their fulfilment (Cherney et al., 2008; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004; Ruck & Horn, 2008).

The UNCRC provides a balance between, on the one hand, the engagement of children as active agents in their own lives, and on the other, their entitlement to additional protection during the period of childhood. Nonetheless, a preference is often found for protective over participative rights for children (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014). Research on adults' perceptions of children's rights has found that the type of right under consideration (e.g., protection or participation) is an important variable to consider (Helwig, 1995, 1997; Wrightsman et al., 1975). It has been consistently found that adults tend to support children's protection rights over participation rights (e.g., Day et al., 2006; Ost, 2013; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004; Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978). Furthermore, adults tend to show endorsement of children's protection rights regardless of age (Peterson-Badali et al., 2003), but participation rights are only endorsed with increasing age of the child (e.g. Bohrnstedt,

Freeman & Smith, 1981; Peterson-Badali et al., 2003; Ruck et al., 2002; Ruck, Keating, Saewyc, Earls, & Ben-Arieh, 2014).

A denial of participation rights is often made on the premise that children cannot act competently in their own self-interest. Yet there should be no lower age limit on the right to participate. Children from the very youngest ages can form views, and such views should be given due weight and consideration (Lansdown, 2010). The age of a child is closely linked to perceptions of that child's competence (Cherney, 2010). Research suggests that both adults and children support participation rights with increasing age and also perceptions of the target child's evolving maturity and/or competence (e.g., Day et al., 2006; Peterson-Badali et al., 2003; Ruck et al., 2002). When considering children's rights, adults attempt to balance a child's need for protection from their own immaturity with the child's capacity to exercise participation rights (Peterson-Badali et al., 2004).

Although adults appear to endorse a child's right to protection, protection may not be perceived of as being a children's rights issue (Ruck et al., 1998), perhaps being conceived of more as a child welfare issue. The integration between children's rights and child welfare should not just be about protection, but also participation, in delivering strategies to address abuse and the power relations evident in child abuse issues, as inhibiting children their participation rights can heighten their risk of harm (Lansdown, 2010). Coyne and Harder's (2011) qualitative study of children's participation in the context of Irish health care settings highlight the 'protective stance' of parents and health professionals over and above that of the child's competence to participate *per se* and the author's recommend a more situational approach to assessment of children's participatory competence. Although children's rights experts may see participation by children and adolescents as being protective against abuse and exploitation (Feinstein & O'Kane, 2009; Kennan, Brady, & Forkan, 2019; Kilkelly, 2012), it may not be recognised as such by non-experts. Participation supports children's

resilience, which can play an important role in prevention and recovery from abuse. Through participation, survivors of abuse can act as agents of change, take action to prevent and address abuse and exploitation, and be effective advocates for protection rights (Feinstein & O’Kane, 2009). Furthermore, listening and consulting with children and young people can ensure that relevant policies and interventions are child friendly, adequate and appropriate (Feinstein & O’Kane, 2009; Martin, Forde, Dunn Galvin, & O’Connell, 2015).

In accordance with the UNCRC, it is the duty of each ratifying state to ensure children’s rights are upheld through the establishment of effective policy, infrastructure, systems, professional practice, and monitoring procedures (Habashi, Driskill, Lang & DeFalco, 2010; Svevo-Cianci & Valequez, 2010). The reporting of suspected abuse of children is an important element of this. Nonetheless, research has indicated that many adults, including professionals working with children, fail to report suspected abuse (Gilbert, Widom, Browne, Fergusson, Webb & Janson, 2009) which is particularly concerning as continued victimisation can have devastating physical, psychological, and behavioural consequences for the child (Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2008). Some reporting obstacles have been noted in the literature including a lack of knowledge or awareness around child abuse issues (Horwath, 2007) and different patterns of reporting across abuse types (Mathews, 2014). Demographic characteristics of the suspected victim may also influence decision making about referrals. Some studies have found the child’s age to be related to professionals’ likelihood to report (Webster, O’Toole, O’Toole, & Lucal, 2005), while others have found no such relationship (Crenshaw, Crenshaw, & Lichtenberg, 1995).

Within the Irish context, research found a significant proportion of professionals do not report suspicions of child abuse and the type of abuse, the threshold of evidence, and fear of damage of the professional were key factors in the under-reporting of abuse (Bunting, Lazenbatt, & Wallace, 2010). Furthermore, a number of authors have noted the lack of

training in Ireland on the correct recognition and reporting of child abuse among professionals (Bourke & Maunsell, 2015; Buckley & McGarry, 2011; McGarry & Buckley, 2013; Kilkelly, 2007). Nonetheless, the three top sources of referrals to the Child Protection and Welfare agency in Ireland in 2017 (mandatory reporting was introduced in December 2017) were from current mandated reports; members of the police (29%), members of the health service and child and family agency (24%), and schools (12%) (Tusla Child and Family Agency, 2017). With regards to perceptions of rights, a sample of Irish teachers more frequently referenced civil and political rights in relation to ‘all people’ compared to children, whereas safety and protection rights were more frequently referenced when considering children rather than ‘all people’ (Waldron, Kavanagh, Kavanagh, Maunsell, Oberman, O'Reilly, Pike, Prunty & Ruane, 2011; Waldron & Oberman, 2016).

Evidence suggests the culture of a nation can influence reasoning about rights, particularly participation rights (Cherney et al., 2008). Ireland is a predominantly Catholic country at 78% of the population, although this figure is in decline (Central Statistics Office, 2017). Research indicates that Catholics tend to embrace protection rights, determining what is desirable for the child (Cherney & Shing, 2008; Sampson, 2000) and Christian children are less supportive of participation rights than Buddhist children (Cherney & Shing, 2008). In Ireland in recent years there have been a suite of positive changes at governmental level aimed at improving the lives of children, including the passing of the Children’s Rights Referendum in 2012, the Criminal Justice (Withholding of Information on Offences Against Children and Vulnerable People) Bill 2012 making it an offence to withhold information on certain offences against children and vulnerable adults from the police, including, murder, assault, false imprisonment, rape, sexual assault and incest, and the Children First Act 2015 which legally mandates specific persons to report child protection concerns at or above a defined threshold. Mandated persons include health professionals, psychologists, teachers,

managers of crèches and other schools attended by children, social workers, social care workers, police, and members of the clergy. Mandated persons must report to the child protection agency if a child discloses to them in the course of their employment, or if they know or have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child has been harmed, is being harmed, or is at risk of being harmed. Harm refers to assault, ill treatment (including emotional abuse), neglect, or sexual abuse. Such persons must also provide mandated assistance to the child protection agency in the assessment of the concern, if requested. Although somewhat limited with regard to the type of harm included in the Act and the classes of individuals who are mandated to report, international research does indicate that, for child sexual abuse at least, mandatory reporting legislation does appear to be associated with better case identification (Mathews, 2014). Despite initial concerns regarding the impact of the Act on child protection resources in Ireland, it does not appear to have resulted in a large increase in referrals from mandated professionals. Referrals increased from 4774 in March 2017 to 4987 in March 2019, of which only 24% came from mandated reporters (Tusla Child and Family Agency, 2019). In addition, challenges with regards to resources continue to exist in Ireland, as 30% of the child protection and welfare cases in March 2019 were awaiting a social worker allocation, showing only a slight reduction from 32% in March 2017.

Given these recent legislative and policy changes in Ireland, particularly in relation to the mandatory reporting of suspected abuse, the current study set out to evaluate the current state of endorsement of Children's Rights in Ireland and the relationship between such perceptions and the likelihood of reporting suspected abuse. If rights are to serve their intended function, to promote children's wellbeing and protect them from harm, it is critical that we know how adults, as rights enablers, perceive such rights (Peterson-Badali, et al., 2004; Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008) and how such perceptions might influence engagement in a protective practice such as the reporting of suspected abuse. Thus, the current study aims to provide a

contemporary account of the endorsement of children's rights and reporting of abuse, using a subsample of Irish adults (predominantly students). More specifically, this study will address the following research questions

1. Are there differences in these adults' endorsement of participation and protection rights for children?
2. Does the age of the child affect the endorsement of protection and participation rights among this subsample of adults?
3. Does the age of the child affect likelihood of reporting a suspicion of abuse of a child among this subsample of adults?
4. Is there a relationship between the endorsement of rights and the likelihood of reporting suspected abuse?

2. Method

2.1 Design

A quantitative within-groups design was employed in this study. Although there are a number of advantages to qualitative methodologies in terms of the depth of the data provided, a quantitative approach was seen as more suitable to the current research questions. The methodology provides an objective measure of rights endorsement and likelihood of reporting abuse and allows for relatively greater generalisations to be made from the results.

An anonymous survey gathered participants' self-reported endorsement of children's rights and likelihood of reporting. The aim of the anonymous survey was to reduce social desirability and to reduce undue pressure to participate. The questionnaire method allowed for collection of data from a large group of participants. Ethical approval was granted by St. Patrick's College Research Ethics Committee (currently Dublin City University's Research Ethics Committee).

2.2 Sample

Participants were University students and other adults recruited through emails circulated through the faculty in which the students were studying, and through personal contacts of the researchers. Eighty-three participants completed the study (29% male and 71% female; 57% students, 25% non-students, 18% missing data). Age ranged from 18-65 years ($M = 29.5$ years, $SD = 11.74$ years). Sixty percent of the participants were aged 30 years or younger.

The overall aim was to recruit 100 participants. There were three recruitment drives and data collection time-points (Autumn 2016; Autumn 2017, and Autumn 2018); after which the sample was 83. Students, particularly those taking Psychology modules, made up a considerable proportion of the sample.

2.3 Instruments

2.3.1 Perceptions of Children's Rights Questionnaires

A Perceptions of Children's Rights Questionnaire (PCRQ) was developed to examine participants' endorsement of children's rights in general (2 items); protection rights (7 items) and participation rights (6 items). Items were drawn from the wording of the UNCRC and three existing Children's Rights measures: The Children's Rights Attitude Questionnaire (Peterson-Badali, Ruck, & Ridley, 2003); the Children's Rights Attitudes Scale (Rogers & Wrightsman, 1978); and the Turkish University Students' Attitude Scale (Karaman-Kepenekci, 2006). From these combined, a new instrument was developed to ensure it specifically examined rights to participation and protection in children. To optimize face and content validity, the items for the new instrument were selected by two researchers from a larger pool of items based on their ratings of relatedness to participation and protection rights. Some of the items' text were modified for brevity, clarity, and relevance in the Irish context (see Appendix for questionnaire). A Likert scale response was chosen for the questionnaire as it does not force the participant to take a stand on a particular topic but allows them to respond in a degree of agreement.

There were two versions of the questionnaire. In one version, participants were asked to think about a seven-year-old child when completing the items (coded as Protection 7 and Participation 7). In the other version, participants were asked to think of a 14-year-old child (coded as Protection 14 and Participation 14). All participants completed both versions.

There were three separate recruitment drives for this study. In the first instance (n = 27), participants completed the PCRQ online as part of a broader study. The Perceptions of Children's Rights questionnaire was presented with a six-point Likert response scale ranging from one (strongly agree) to six (strongly disagree). In the second and third instance (n = 56),

the PCRQ was presented using a seven point Likert response scale ranging from one (strongly agree) to seven (strongly disagree), and included an additional middle point, labelled as 'neither agree or disagree'. For the purposes of statistical analysis, this neutral point was coded as missing as only participants' level of agreement or disagreement were of interest. The reliability of the overall scale was good ($\alpha = 0.83$) and for the subscales ranged from good to acceptable ($\alpha = 0.70$ for Protection 7; $\alpha = 0.62$ for Participation_7; $\alpha = 0.64$ for Protection 14 and $\alpha = 0.49$ for Participation 14).

Participants were also asked how likely they would be to report suspected abuse of a seven-year-old and a 14-year-old, using the same numbered Likert response as the PCRQ. Data was also gathered on participants' understanding of children's rights, using a single item with a 10-point Likert scale response, and their demographic information.

2.4 Analytic Plan

1. In order to examine the differences in participants' endorsement of participation rights and protection rights across the two age categories (seven-year olds and 14 year olds) a four-factor within-groups ANOVA was used. This allowed for the examination of an overall main effect for type of right and age of child. Post-hoc repeated measures t-tests were then conducted to examine where these effects lie, that is, between the age categories and between the type of rights. Cohen's d, using pooled variance, were conducted to examine the strength of these differences.
2. A within-groups t-test was conducted to examine differences in participants' likelihood of reporting suspected abuse of a seven-year-old and a 14-year-old.
3. Two linear regressions (seven-year-old and 14-year-old) examined whether endorsement of participation and protection rights and understanding of children's rights predicted likelihood of reporting suspected child abuse. The predictors were

chosen as one of the research aims were to examine whether perceptions and understanding of rights would lead to a higher reported likelihood of reporting abuse. Each regression involved entering all three predictors (participation, protection, and endorsement) for that age group into the model at once using the Enter method.

3. Results

The descriptive statistics for the endorsement of participation and protection rights and likelihood of reporting abuse for two age categories are presented in Table 1. As indicated, participants generally reported high levels of endorsement of protection and participation rights for both age groups, with a mean score of 5.51 and 3.94 out of 6 for protection and participation rights for seven year olds, respectively; and 5.40 and 4.48 out of 6 for protection and participation rights for 14 year olds, respectively.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

3.1 Differences Between Participation and Protection Rights Across the Two Age Categories

A within-groups four factor ANOVA examined differences between the four types of rights' endorsements. As the data violated the test of sphericity the Greenhouse-Geisser test of within-subjects' effects was reported (Field, 2013). A significant effect was found ($F(1.98, 134) = 133.95, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.66$). Post hoc t-tests examined the effect further.

Participants showed a higher endorsement of protection rights for seven-year-olds ($M = 5.53, SD = 0.64$) compared with 14-year-olds ($M = 5.40, SD = 0.64$), $t(68) = 2.63, p < 0.05, d = 0.22$. Participants showed a lower endorsement of participation rights for seven-year-olds ($M = 3.97, SD = 0.83$) compared with 14-year-olds ($M = 4.49, SD = 0.77$), $t(68) = -5.91, p < 0.001, d = 0.65$. A significant difference was also found between participants' endorsement of protection rights and endorsement of participation rights for seven-year-olds, $t(75) = 14.29, p$

< 0.001 , $d = 2.11$. Participants endorsed protection rights ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 0.64$) more than participation rights ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.83$, $d = 2.10$) for seven-year-olds. A significant difference was also found between participants' endorsement of protection rights and endorsement of participation rights for 14-year-olds, $t(75) = 10.80$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.30$. Participants endorsed protection rights ($M = 5.40$, $SD = 0.62$) more than participation rights ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.77$) for 14-year-olds.

3.2 Likelihood of Reporting Suspected Abuse

A t-test indicated the participants were more likely to report suspected abuse of a seven-year-old ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 0.83$) compared with a 14-year-old ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 0.85$), $t(64) = 2.01$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.14$.

Two linear regressions examined the predictors of the likelihood of reporting suspected abuse of the two age categories. The predictors entered into the model were endorsement of protection rights, endorsement of participation rights, and understanding of children's rights. The model was significant for the seven-year old age category ($F(3, 54) = 5.83$, $p < 0.01$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.20$). Endorsement of protection rights for seven-year olds was the only significant predictor of likelihood of reporting abuse of a seven-year-old ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$). Endorsement of seven-year-olds participation rights was not a significant predictor of likelihood of reporting abuse. Understanding of children's rights was not a significant predictor in the model, although it was approaching significance ($p = 0.05$). The model predicting the likelihood of reporting abuse of a 14-year-old was also significant. ($F(3, 53) = 4.38$, $p < 0.01$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.15$). Endorsement of protection rights for 14-year olds was a significant predictor of likelihood of reporting abuse of a seven-year-old ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$). Understanding of children's rights was also a significant predictor in the model ($\beta = 0.26$, $p <$

0.05). Endorsement of 14-year-olds participation rights was not a significant predictor of likelihood of reporting abuse.

The results are presented in Table 2

[Insert Table 2 and Table 3 about here]

4. Discussion

How adults conceptualise children's rights is crucial to their implementation and success of their fulfilment (Cherney et al., 2008; Peterson-Badali et al., 2003; Peterson-Badali et al., 2004; Ruck & Horn, 2008; Ruck et al., 2002). Adults, through their voting behaviour, influence the policies and legislation in relation to children. Through their interactions with children as both parents and professionals, adults have a critical role to play as enablers of children's rights. As expected, given previous research, the current study found variability in endorsement depending on the age of the target child and the type of right under consideration, such that this subsample of Irish adults endorsed more protection and less participation rights for both groups of children, with a higher effect for younger children relative to older children. Participants had a higher endorsement of participation rights for adolescents compared to children, and a higher endorsement of protection rights for children compared with adolescents. Such findings are important given the underpinning objective of these rights are for the optimal well-being and safety of children and the critical role of adults in enabling them (Peterson-Badali, et al., 2004; Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008).

This study found that although protection rights are endorsed more than participation rights for both age categories, a higher level of endorsement was found for the younger children compared with the older children. This highlights the need for consideration of the age of the target child in making comparisons across categories of rights. While previous studies show similar levels of endorsement of protection rights regardless of the age of the

target child (e.g., Peterson-Badali et al., 2003), others, similar to the current findings albeit with different age ranges, report a higher level of endorsement of protection rights for younger compared with older adolescents (Ruck et al. (2002). Such findings may suggest that younger children are perceived as more vulnerable and in need of protection, increasing the potential conflict between protection and participation rights. These results show that the current participants were more likely to prioritise a child's right to freedom from harm over and above their right to have their voice heard in society and taken seriously. Such lower endorsement of participation may reflect a poor understanding of what participation entails and may result from the socio-cultural image of children as vulnerable and in need of adult protection (Bijleveld, Dedding & Bunders-Aelen, 2015).

The finding of a higher endorsement of participation rights for older compared to younger children were as expected and supports previous research that adults' support for children's participation rights increases with the age of the child (Helwig, 1997; Peterson-Badali et al., 2003; Ruck et al., 2002). Indeed, it has been argued that the concepts of maturity and evolving capacities as noted in the UNCRC may imply that the views of older children are given more weight up to the level that their views are taken as decisive (Doek, 2019). The level of endorsement of such participation rights determines children's role as citizens and their understanding and awareness of democracy. Such rights support a sense of autonomy and agency which are critical for the child's well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and equally important teaches children how they can bring about change (Smith, 2007). The higher endorsement of participation rights for older relative to younger children may reflect the participants' view of the increased capacities of adolescents compared with younger children. This is reflective of developmental theories of cognition which sees cognitive abilities as moving away from the concrete operations in middle childhood to more abstract

and formal operations in adolescence (Piaget, 1958). A high proportion of participants were Psychology and Education students and likely aware of such theories.

It has been argued that the emphasis on protection rights, as evidenced in the current study, which stress society's obligation to protect the child from harm and providing for what is in the best interest of the child could be considered a paternalistic approach, in that what is considered in the best interest of the child is often determined for the child by an adult figure of authority (Cherney et. Al., 2008; Doek, 2019; Ruck & Horn, 2008; Wrightsman et al., 1975). The strongest effect size in this study was evidenced in the higher level of endorsement of protection rights compared with participation rights for both age groups. This may be reflective of the paternalistic approach which reduces the emphasis on the child's capability for participation. Additionally, adults may underestimate children's capacities to contribute to decision-making because their contributions are not expressed in ways which may be used by adults, and such misconceptions can significantly hinder the realisation of children's participatory rights (Lansdown, 2010). Participation rights are very important within a societal context where adult authority and power is absolute. Children's role as citizens, and their awareness of democracy, is determined by the extent to which their participation rights are enabled.

This research makes an important and novel contribution to the literature as it attempts to integrate these children's rights findings with child protection and welfare literature. A large proportion of this sample came from a student cohort who will become professionals who will be legally mandated to report abuse. The findings indicate that endorsement of protection rights, but not participation rights, predicted the likelihood of reporting abuse of seven-year olds and 14-year olds. Furthermore, understanding of children's rights was a predicted likelihood of reporting abuse of a 14-year old. These findings provide some clarity on the influences on adult responding to violations of children's

rights and reporting of suspected abuse. As this was an exploratory research question, there was no specific expectation in relation to this. This has critical implications as poor reporting of child abuse and neglect can leave children vulnerable to continued victimisation, which can have devastating physical, psychological, and behavioural consequences for the child (Gilbert et al., 2009; Widom et al., 2008), and, in some cases, the perpetrator being left free to continue the abuse of the child and potentially other children. Such results provide a strong argument for good quality education on children's rights for professionals working with children and public awareness campaigns to improve general knowledge and understanding of children's rights in order to ensure children are in receipt of the appropriate support and protection when there is a risk of abuse. The findings also indicate that participants not only endorse protection rights of younger children more strongly than they do older children, but are also more likely to report the suspected abuse of seven-year-olds over that of 14-year-olds. Although there is limited research on the age of potential victims and the likelihood of reporting abuse, research does suggest that a younger age is linked with increased contact with child protection services (MacMillan, Jamieson, & Walsh, 2003) and re-reporting to child protection services (Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2008). The current findings highlight a particular vulnerability of older children who may be viewed as needing less protection than younger children.

The target older age in this study was 14 years; this stage in life is characterised by increases in autonomy and individuation (Blos, 1967) and the development of self-identity (Erikson, 1968). Notwithstanding these developments, the adolescent continues to be vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and rights to protection from abuse are as important at this stage as earlier in their development. Finkelhor and colleagues (2009) report prevalence rates of: 46.9% for physical assault; 16.3% for sexual victimisation; 12.1% for emotional abuse; and 1.9% for neglect of 14 to 17-year olds in their past year, and rates were generally

higher for this 14- to 17-year old age group than younger children. It has also been reported that adolescents have an increased susceptibility to particular forms of abuse, including an increased vulnerability to sex trafficking (Smith, Healy Vardaman & Snow, 2009) and sexual exploitation (Beckett & Schubotz, 2014). This research highlights a need for continued protection from abuse throughout childhood and adolescence.

The current results should be interpreted within the Irish context given the influence of cultural values on conceptualisations and implementations of rights (e.g., Cherney et al., 2008). Ireland is a democratic Western culture, which is thought to be more compatible with participation rights (Ruck, Keating, Saewyc, Earls & Ben-Arieh, 2014). Although evidence suggests differences between countries with regards to their endorsement of different types of children's rights (Cherney et al., 2008; Melton & Limber, 1992; Peterson-Badali et al., 2003), little is known, to date, about such attitudes in Ireland. The increased endorsement of protection rights for both age groups may be reflective of the religiosity of the population, as previous research suggests that Catholics tend to support protection rights (Cherney & Shing, 2008; Sampson, 2000). Although the current sample demographic (predominantly under 30) have the lowest level of Catholicism of the Irish adult population, this age group of Irish adults are predominantly Catholic; 69% of 20-24 year olds and 66% of 25-29 year olds self-reported as Catholic in the 2016 Census (CSO, 2017). While individuals may self-report as Catholic, it is unknown whether they hold strong Catholic religious' beliefs or whether this is a result of the historic dominant role of Catholicism in Irish society. Ireland has also undergone a suite of legislative changes in the past decade, as indicated earlier, including the introduction of mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse for some professionals, the discourse surrounding which may have influenced adults' perceptions of children's rights.

Although the UNCRC recognises children of all ages as influential actors in their own development and that of society, recognising children's participation rights is one of the most

innovative and constantly challenged rights of the Convention (Peleg, 2019). The current findings may be reflective of the broader ambiguity that surrounds the notion of participation in the wider context of the discourse on children's rights (Lansdown, 2010). The notion of 'evolving capacities' that accompanies participation rights may indeed imply that more weight should be given to the views and opinions of older children (Doek, 2019) and those who determine the weight given to these capacity-determined views are adults, thus undermining the principle of participation. Participation rights should be empowering to all children, they should enable them to reshuffle the power structures in society between children and adults; however, implementing this right requires a shift in the way we think about children's capacities and their role in society (Peleg, 2019) and the current findings support a clear age differentiation in the support of these rights, reinforcing the vulnerability of younger children being silenced and disempowered.

Overall, the current results are encouraging as they indicate positive attitudes to children's rights, with participants tending to agree or strongly agree with both participation and protection rights for both younger and older children. The limitations of this study should, however, be noted. Perhaps most importantly, the current study could be judged as paternalistic by its nature by not representing the child's voice and only including adults in the sample. The categorisation of rights into participation and protection has also been criticised for framing research in a problematic way (Quennerstedt, 2010). A further important limitation of this design lies in the representativeness of the sample of the population of Ireland, and results should be interpreted in light of this. The sample was small, predominantly female, and over half of the sample consisted of Psychology and Education students which limits the generalisability of the findings. As noted above such students have likely had a particular exposure to issues related to child development, and females have been found to show a higher endorsement of protection rights than males (e.g., Peterson-Badali et

al., 2003). The quantitative nature of this study means that contextual detail is not examined. The quantitative design may also have resulted in structural bias in terms of the method adopted, including the type and items within the questionnaire used, and recruitment procedures. Generally, the children's rights scale showed good reliability but the individual subscale for Participation 14 was only acceptable. Future research could look at developing this scale further with a larger sample. Social desirability may also have impacted on the results, despite the use of an online anonymised questionnaire. Additionally, there was no information gathered on participants' engagement with child protection or children's rights legal training, which would have added more depth to the study and helped to contextualise the findings.

The variability in the endorsements of rights and their relationship with likelihood of reporting highlight the importance of appropriate education programmes focusing on children's rights (Campbell & Covell, 2001), particularly for those who currently, and who may in the future, work with children. Such programmes should highlight the continued vulnerability of older children and adolescents to abuse and emphasise the types of abuses these age groups are particularly susceptible to. Additionally, programmes should emphasise rights to participation across all age groups, and highlight the civil and political status of the child as an individual (Smith, 2007) with rights to exercise some degree of control over their own lives (Ruck & Horn, 2008; Ruck et al., 1998; Wrightsman et al., 1975). Such education could give practical suggestions as to how the participation rights of younger children could be further embedded in society, such as consultation in school policy planning or in the development of child intervention services.

The children's rights topic is 'many faceted and complex' (Wrightsman et al., 1975, p. 2) and the current findings highlight some of this complexity surrounding ages of children and types of rights as endorsed by a group of Irish adults. Such findings are important given

that rights are promoted or resisted differently, depending on the meaning they hold for particular people, including children themselves and those who have the most contact with them and power over them (Smith, 2007). The current findings emphasise the importance of such perceptions for adults to take action in the case of violation of such rights.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Endorsement of Participation and Protection Rights and Likelihood of Reporting Abuse for Two Age Categories

| | Seven-year-old | Fourteen-year-old |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| | <i>M (SD)</i> | <i>M (SD)</i> |
| Protection | 5.53 (0.64) | 5.40 (0.62) |
| Participation | 3.97 (0.83) | 4.49 (0.77) |
| Likelihood of Reporting Abuse | 5.61 (0.83) | 5.49 (0.85) |

Table 2

Linear regression to predict the likelihood of reporting the abuse of a seven-year-old.

| Variables | <i>t</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | <i>Signif</i> |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Participation 7 | 0.52 | 0.13 | 0.06 | n/s |
| Protection 7 | 3.86 | 0.15 | 0.47 | $p < 0.01$ |
| Understanding of Rights | 2.01 | 0.05 | 0.24 | n/s |

Table 3

Linear regression to predict the likelihood of reporting the abuse of a 14-year-old.

| Variables | <i>t</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | <i>Signif</i> |
|-------------------------|----------|-----------|---------|---------------|
| Participation 14 | 0.17 | 0.17 | 0.03 | n/s |
| Protection 14 | 2.71 | 0.19 | 0.53 | $p < 0.01$ |
| Understanding of Rights | 2.01 | 0.06 | 0.26 | $p < 0.01s$ |

Appendix

Children's Rights Questionnaire

(One version was worded for participants to consider a seven-year-old child and another was worded for participants to consider a 14-year-old)

This questionnaire asks for your opinions about children's rights. We are interested in

understanding how children and adults think about what rights children should have. **When reading the statements on this survey, please think of children aged 7.**

Each sentence in this questionnaire represents an opinion and there are no right or wrong answers. You will probably disagree with some sentences and agree with others. We are interested in how much you agree or disagree with each sentence.

Some of the statements may sound similar, so read each *carefully*. Then circle the number which best corresponds or matches your opinion.

Children (7 year olds) should be protected from all forms of abuse.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| strongly disagree | somewhat disagree | slightly disagree | slightly agree | somewhat agree | strongly agree |

Support services for children (7 year olds) who have suffered any form of abuse are not a right.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| strongly disagree | somewhat disagree | slightly disagree | slightly agree | somewhat agree | strongly agree |

Children (7 year olds) should have a right to see confidential school records which make reference to them.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| strongly disagree | somewhat disagree | slightly disagree | slightly agree | somewhat agree | strongly agree |

Neglect (of 7 year olds) should not be taken as seriously as abuse.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| strongly disagree | somewhat disagree | slightly disagree | slightly agree | somewhat agree | strongly agree |

Children (7 year olds) should have the right to vote to ensure that their interests will be represented.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| strongly disagree | somewhat disagree | slightly disagree | slightly agree | somewhat agree | strongly agree |

Children (7 year olds) should have the right to decide which recreational activities they will participate in.

| | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| strongly disagree | somewhat disagree | slightly disagree | slightly agree | somewhat agree | strongly agree |

If children (7 year olds) misbehave in school, any punishment that works should be allowed.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

Children (7 year olds) should not have the right to decide which school they will attend.

1 2 3 4 5 6
strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

Parents have a right to choose which religion a child (7 year old) practices regardless of the wishes of the child.

1 2 3 4 5 6
strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

Punishment for a crime by a child (7 year old) should be less severe than the punishment given an adult for the same offense.

1 2 3 4 5 6
strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

Children (7 year olds) should be protected from sexual exploitation.

1 2 3 4 5 6
strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

Children (7 year olds) should have a right to express their ideas and opinions and for these ideas and opinions to be taken into consideration.

1 2 3 4 5 6
strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

Parents should be allowed to use physical punishment on their own child (7 year old) to manage their behaviour.

1 2 3 4 5 6
strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

I would report suspicions of abuse of a seven year old to the appropriate authorities.

1 2 3 4 5 6
strongly disagree somewhat disagree slightly disagree slightly agree somewhat agree strongly agree

On a scale from 1 through 10, how would you rate your own understanding of children's rights?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Low understanding

High Understanding