Speak Up! Voices of European Children in Vulnerable Situations

An Explorative Study of Children’s Rights in Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands

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Abstract

The aim of the Speak up! study is to increase our knowledge of European children in vulnerable situations or with special needs, and their own views about their rights and what needs to be improved. The methodology was to play a children’s rights game and to hold in-depth discussions about children’s rights in focus groups with children in vulnerable situations and in control groups. The qualitative study of children took place in eight European countries. Children, particularly children in vulnerable situations or with special needs, are insufficiently aware of their rights. Children living in vulnerable situations have very little experience of being listened to. They face discrimination due to disability, ethnic background or social disadvantage, and also due to being under 18-years-old. This study concludes that children in vulnerable situations or with special needs should not be viewed as passive victims but as social actors with the right to be listened to.

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Keywords


Introduction

The right to be heard and taken seriously is fundamental to human dignity and the healthy development of every child and young person. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a child is entitled to participate, to have their voice heard, and to be able to influence decisions affecting them (article 12) (CRC, 2012). In line with CRC, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRDP) is a convention that emphasises the right of children with disabilities to participation (UNCRDP 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a paradigm shift in research about children (see Brunnberg, 2013a; Åkerström. 2014). This resulted in children being seen as social agents and competent informants about issues that matter to them (James and James, 2005). However, children are still excluded in many ways from participation in decisions that affect them (Cassidy, 2012), and involvement of children in the policy process is still limited (Arnott, 2008). Children in vulnerable situations have the same rights as other children to participation. However, there is a critical ethical dilemma in research to balance the rights of children to be heard about matters that affect them and the rights to be protected from any possible exploitation or harm. This dilemma might explain the very limited research with children in vulnerable situations. Muldaly and Goddard (2009) argued that strategies which empower and promote children’s informed participation, and minimise risks, are possible. Children in vulnerable situations and in need of protection may be refugee children, children without parents, children from minorities, abused children, children in detention and children with disabilities etc. Like adults, children cope with their vulnerable situations and special needs in different ways. Some children who are stronger than others stand up for themselves, but others do not speak up. The outreach to children who are experiencing situations of particular vulnerability is difficult, but particular efforts should be made to enable participation of children and young people with fewer opportunities than others (Committee of Ministers, 2012).

In some years, young people aged 15–17 have been consulted about children’s rights (see Eurobarometer, 2008; 2009). The Eurobarometer has
regularly carried out quantitative surveys at the request of the European Commission. In 2009, over 10,000 randomly selected young people (15–18 years) were interviewed across the EU. The quantitative surveys are aimed at finding the level of children’s awareness about their rights and understanding of the critical issues they face in terms of their rights. Almost two-thirds of young people (15–17 years) from the 27 EU Member States were aware that people under 18 enjoy specific rights compared to adults. When asked which problems might be encountered by people under 18 trying to defend their rights, the most commonly mentioned problems were that they would not know how to defend their rights and whom to contact (80 per cent) and that they would simply not be aware of their rights (78 per cent) (Eurobarometer, 2009 pp. 5–6). In 2010, another qualitative Eurobarometer survey was carried out with 1,445 children in 170 focus groups (Eurobarometer, 2010). The sample was broadly representative of boys and girls aged 15 to 17, from urban and rural areas, lower and higher economic groups, a mix of ethnic backgrounds, and a group of children with physical needs. The objectives of the study were to understand which issues children find most important in terms of their rights, to understand the obstacles children face in exercising their rights and to have the views of children with possible solutions to overcome these problems. Few young people in the qualitative Eurobarometer survey thought about human rights and they did not automatically associate the rights with their own situation and the situations of those they know. However, when considering children’s rights they reported a number of ways in which both their own situations and those of the different groups of vulnerable children could be better ensured and protected. Adults living or working with children should look out more for signals of distress among children. There are children at risk of violence at home or in the community who need protection. Bullying emerged as another issue that worried the young people. Poverty is also a key factor in terms of children having their rights threatened. Children with special needs need more opportunities for integration and full access to educational opportunities. Children living in institutions, on the streets, children from minority ethnic groups and children from Roma, Sinti or Traveller Communities are other groups of children that the young people considered to live in vulnerable situations and are in danger of having their rights ignored or violated.

This article will mainly focus on younger children (12–15 years old) in vulnerable situations or with special needs. The objectives of the Speak up!

1 Single children were younger or older than 12–15.
project were to understand which issues children find most important in terms of their rights, to understand the obstacles children face in exercising their rights, and to hear the views of children with possible solutions to overcome these problems.

The outcomes of the consultations with the children on children's rights in the *UNCRC* will be divided into three groups of rights – provision rights, participation rights, and protection rights (Government of Netherlands, 2013). *Provision rights* are rights providing children access to certain goods and services, such as the right to health care (art. 24), the right to education (arts. 28, 29), the right to housing (art. 27) and the right to enjoy social security (art. 26). *Participation rights* are the rights of children to participate actively in decisions about their own lives and in society as a whole. Examples of participation rights include the rights to express an opinion (art. 12) and the right to information (art. 17), the right to play (art. 31) and the right for children from minorities to enjoy their own culture. *Protection rights* are the rights which aim to protect children from harm, such as the right to be protected against maltreatment and neglect (art. 19), the right to be protected from sexual exploitation (art. 34), and the right to be protected from torture and deprivation of liberty (art. 37). The right to an identity (art. 8) and the right for all children to be treated equally (art. 2), the so-called non-discrimination article, also fall within this category.

In this article several important points of view from children's perspectives will be highlighted, based on their, sometimes brutal, life experiences.

**Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study was to increase our knowledge and understanding of European children in vulnerable situations or with special needs, and their own views about their rights and what needs to be improved compared with a control group of children. This article reports on a consultation with children who might be particularly vulnerable for various reasons, and included children from the travelling community (Travellers), Roma children, children with disabilities, children living in poverty, asylum-seeking children, children taken into care (foster care and residential care) and children who have been in contact with the juvenile justice system. The project does not claim to be representative of the experiences and knowledge of children's rights among all children in vulnerable situations or with special needs across Europe, but the intention is to demonstrate cross-national experiences of children in these situations.
Methodology and Design

The definition of children’s participation used in this study is based on Article 12 of the CRC, i.e. that children in vulnerable situations will have their voices heard. This study is a qualitative case study involving children in vulnerable situations from eight European countries and a control group of children from regular schools in these countries. Most children were consulted in focus groups and they played a children’s right game. The exception were the children in juvenile justice institutions who were, due to the situation they were in, consulted by individual interviews. In each country the researchers assessed that the children belonged to groups of children who were in vulnerable situations in that particular country. The selected groups of children could vary according to country. Within each country a control group of children from secondary schools was selected. The consultations with the children were conducted in focus groups. The control group could include individuals who had special needs or who were vulnerable. The study is exploratory and is very varied in terms of both the vulnerable situations children may find themselves in and the composition of the focus group. All the children were given a basic knowledge of the UNCRC through information provided by the researchers and the game about children’s rights. All groups except the groups in Bulgaria used the children’s rights game.

In a focus group, is conducted a discussion to explore individuals’ perceptions and experiences of a particular theme (Kitzinger, 1994; McLafferty, 2004; Tinnfält, 2007; Brunnberg, 2013). In our focus groups, or consultation process as we also call it, a discussion was using creative elements to explore the children’s perceptions and experiences of children’s rights. Children at risk of abuse and neglect are not easy for adults in society to identify. Denial and secrecy are issues in troubled families, and the rule in the family is to not talk about the situation or tell anybody outside about it (Christensen 1997; Tinnfält, Eriksson and Brunnberg, 2011). Shame and guilt are factors that can increase reluctance to disclose family secrets and children of all ages can repress or dissociate the problem (Svedin and Back, 2003). In a Swedish study with adolescent children of alcoholics, the children before disclosure have raised their own level of consciousness, told a peer, told an adult stranger, or indirectly communicated with an adult about their situation (Tinnfält, Eriksson and Brunnberg, 2011). The children were assessing the trustworthiness of adults before disclosing their home situation. Adults, who ask questions, listen carefully, and cooperate with the child/adolescent, and who are knowledgeable about families with alcohol problems, are considered as supportive and trustworthy. The adolescents reported psychological, communicative, environmental and generational aspects of the disclosure process.
Participants

The partners in each country organised focus groups of 8 to 12 children. Children aged 12–15 years, with some exceptions – children as young as 7 years old and a few 16 year old children – participated in focus group meetings in eight European countries. The groups, comprising children in vulnerable situations, included deaf or hard-of-hearing children, asylum-seeking children living in an asylum centre, children living in “urban pockets of poverty”, Roma children, Traveller children, children in juvenile justice institutions (secure establishments), and children in care. The focus groups of children varied in the nature of their vulnerability, but the researchers identified them as members of the most vulnerable groups in their country. The conditions that create vulnerability vary from country to country. There is more than one group in each country with conditions creating vulnerability, but only one of the groups took part in this study. The specific group chosen in each country comprised a group of children in vulnerable situations that were selected by the researchers on the basis of their knowledge of the group of children and their experience in working with them. This would facilitate the communication with the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Children and young people in vulnerable or marginalized situations consulted by partners</th>
<th>Timing of meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Roma children from rural areas</td>
<td>Residential weekend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Roma children</td>
<td>A sequence of shorter sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Children in residential care and children in foster care</td>
<td>One-and-a half-days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Travellers’ children</td>
<td>Three meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Asylum seeking children living in asylum centres</td>
<td>Half-day meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Children living in ‘urban poverty pockets’</td>
<td>One-day meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Deaf and hard-of-hearing children</td>
<td>Residential weekend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>Children in Secure Children’s Homes</td>
<td>Individual interviews and one small focus group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
children. The children in the control groups were not in a vulnerable position as a group, but could still be vulnerable individually.

The study tried to achieve a geographical balance of children participating from across the European Union, involving children from Southern Europe (Greece), from Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland), from Western Europe (Ireland, the UK and the Netherlands) and from Northern Europe (Sweden).

In each country two parallel groups were organised, one of which was a control group with children from randomised secondary schools who did not live in particularly vulnerable circumstances or had vulnerable characteristics, in the same way as the children in the other groups. However, it was noted that several individual children in the control groups also had their particular vulnerability.

**Implementation of the Study**

Prior to the consultations with the children, a methodology and toolkit were developed together with the Speak Up! partners and based on their experiences of good practice. There was an outline for the programme of the consultation in the focus groups in the different countries. This included information on what the children should be informed about, a children’s rights game, and specific questions to be raised with the children (Eurochild, 2013a).

The partners could choose the format and timing of the consultation events, so these could vary in the different countries. All focus group meetings were held between November 2011 and March 2012. The programme was identical for all focus groups, and included an explanation of the Speak Up! project and an introduction to the different partners via a video message from all partners. The programme also included an explanation of the work of the EU in relation to children’s rights. The consultation varied according to the children’s circumstances and needs. In Sweden, the hard-of-hearing and deaf children met during a residential weekend. During the sessions, they used both sign language and spoken language. In Hungary, the session was one-and-a-half days. In Greece, the children met in four shorter sessions, and similar shorter sessions were held in Poland, where the children met after school. In Ireland the children met for a full day. In Netherlands, half a day was used for the consultations with asylum seeking children and the “control” group, with follow-up work done by the facilitators where the asylum seeking children and the “control” group supported by the facilitators that drafted two full-colour magazines which were sent back to the children for feedback (Eurochild, 2013b). In
the UK, some of the children were interviewed individually, because they were living in secure juvenile justice institutions and were not allowed to meet in a focus group. The focus groups with the children in control groups took place at another time and could be arranged in different ways. However, all children in all groups played the children’s rights game and related their experiences to the articles in CRC.

The children’s rights game included 14 “real” children’s rights as laid down in the CRC and 11 “fake” rights, such as “every child has the right to drive a lorry” or “every child has the right to colour his/her hair” (Eurochild, 2013a; Mälardalen Research Center, 2015). The game was developed by Defence for Children International/Netherlands (DCI/NL) and further elaborated by Eurochild partners in the Speak up! project. The 14 UNCRC rights were selected in cooperation with the partners involved, based on which rights would be most relevant to and close to the children’s personal experiences and lives, taking into consideration the different groups of children that would participate. The reason for selecting a limited number of rights was that it would not have been feasible and productive for the discussions with the children to look at all CRC rights. The children had to choose which rights they thought would be “real” and which would be “fake”, indicating the reasons for their choices. After playing the children’s rights game the children were familiar with the various children’s rights, they were asked to select four rights which they felt were most important and close to their own life experiences and situations. The children’s rights game provided a catalyst for a range of in-depth discussions; although it did not provide strictly comparative data, it provided a common frame for the children’s answers. The four selected rights were discussed in more depth and the children could use different ways to express their feelings and experiences, such as interviews, group discussions, paintings, drama, etc. Creative activities were often used to enable children to express their experiences and ideas.

Energizers and Creative Activities

During the meetings, various energizers and creative activities, such as drawing, dancing, singing, photography, drama and magazine making took place. In some groups, singing and dancing was part of the children’s culture and it made them feel at ease during the consultations. The children met as a full focus group but were split up in smaller groups for the consultations. Various physical activities were also used as relaxing energizers.
Gender Balance

The aim was to achieve a gender balance in the focus groups, with equal participation of boys and girls, but this was not always possible in all 16 groups. In Ireland, the group of Traveller children solely consisted of girls, since in Traveller culture there is limited contact between young boys and girls. Parents are often not comfortable giving permission to young girls to attend external events with boys. In the Netherlands, the control group was mainly composed of girls; this may be because the children were asked in a school class to volunteer to participate in the focus group, which involved writing and producing a magazine, including taking photos with a professional photographer. Apparently girls were keener to get involved in journalistic and photo-art work than boys in this class. In Sweden, the control group also mainly comprised girls who volunteered at school to take part in the focus group and also in Hungary more girls than boys participated in the control group. In contrast, in the UK, more boys participated in the control group than girls, which was reflective of the gender breakdown of children who were in a behavioural support group attached to their school.

Common Framework and Analysis

The facilitators discussed with the children their general knowledge of children’s rights. They played the children’s rights game and held in-depth discussions of four specific children’s rights selected by the children. The articles were relevant to their life experiences. The children were given the same framework in which to relate their experiences. In this article, we analyse the four rights selected by the different groups of children; these rights were divided into provision rights, protection rights and participation rights.

The project used this strict methodological framework to ensure the comparability of consultations with children in vulnerable situations and the control groups. The children’s rights game ensured that children became acquainted with children’s rights in a pedagogic way, discussing real and fake rights. All children then chose the real rights they considered to be most important, and talked about their experiences in relation to these rights. This ensured that the outcomes of the different groups of children and the different countries were comparable.
Strengths and Limitations of the Research Methodology

The methodology, including the children's game with the fake and real children's rights, proved to be a successful way to learn about children's rights. The Speak Up! project showed that groups of children in vulnerable situations could be involved in participation activities. What is required is good methodology, such as creative activities that appeal to the specific group of children and encourage them to participate. In addition, the programme, the environment where the children are meeting, the time, and the facilitators play a crucial role, according to the children in their post-meeting evaluations. The consultations showed that researchers need to be sensitive, not only to what the children talk about but also to what children do not talk about. Sensitive issues that affected children's lives did not come out in all of the children's consultations, though a mixed picture can be seen in the project. For example early marriages, which is an issue for Traveller girls, was not brought up by the Irish Traveller girls. However, the Roma children in Bulgaria did discuss this. The experience of living in the streets was not brought up by any of the children, though the facilitators were aware that some children sometimes spent their nights on the street. With not just consultations in focus groups but also individual interviews the children maybe could have told even more about special issues of importance to them.

Ethics

The study was reviewed by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala, Sweden, and approved (Ref. no. 2011/195). In all countries, the recommendations of the Ethical Review Board in Sweden were followed. An assumption of the consultations was that the children would participate voluntarily, but the facilitators of one of the groups in vulnerable situations noted that some children seemed to be forced to participate by staff at the residential home. However, the children in this group did not leave and were very enthusiastic and indicated they had fun.

Results

What Children Know about their Rights
All children were asked about their knowledge of children's rights, whether they had ever heard that children had rights, and whether they could name any
rights. The facilitators gave an introduction and explained children’s rights, and cards with fake and real children’s rights were used to familiar the children with the different rights and their meanings. Figure 1 shows that most children, both those in vulnerable situations and those in the control groups, had little or no knowledge of children’s rights.

Among the children in vulnerable circumstances, the majority had hardly any or no knowledge at all about their rights at the start of the consultations, while children in the control groups had at least some knowledge of their rights. However, when children were asked to identify rights they should chose rights specified in the UN CRC. Both Bulgarian children, of Roma origin and those in the control group, were not particularly aware of children’s rights and any knowledge they had was fragmented. Within the control group, the wording of some fundamental rights was recognised, but the children did not link this to their personal situation.

In Hungary, the two groups of children in foster care and living in residential care had never heard about children’s rights before. The children in the control group had human rights education at school, but children’s rights had not been part of this.

The Greek children in both groups were unaware of the UN CRC. Some Roma children had difficulties in fully grasping the more difficult-worded rights. However, they felt there is a clear distinction between adults and children, and a need for children’s rights.

The Irish Traveller children were able to talk about rights as important in their lives, but were not able to identify internal issues affecting their lives

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![Figure 1: Awareness of children’s rights](image-url)

**FIGURE 1** Awareness of children’s rights
within their community. Internal roles and rules in their community that suppress and hinder their rights could be a reason for this. Other reasons why children were not able to or did not discuss personal issues could have been that it was unusual for them to be asked for their opinion and they were not used to being heard. Furthermore, the feeling of powerlessness may have prevented children from sharing their thoughts for change and solutions.

Many of the asylum-seeking children in the Netherlands had been told about children’s rights at school in the Netherlands. The children from the Dutch control group had also received information on children’s rights at primary school and they were all aware of the Anti-Bullying Day. Most of the children, both asylum-seeking children and control group children, talked about children’s rights as being rights for other children and found it difficult to focus on their own rights. This was an outcome for the consultations across the eight countries, where children found it easier to see the needs and rights of other children, than to understand their own situation related to others.

The Polish children in the control group felt that children had different rights to adults, and they felt these differences were particularly related to voting rights and the right to work and education: ‘School for children is like a job for adults’ (Polish girl, 12 years). Some of them had heard about children’s rights at school, on TV, or read about them. Some of the Polish children with vulnerable characteristics had also heard about children’s rights at school or read about it.

The Swedish deaf and hard-of-hearing children only had a vague idea about the contents of the CRC. During a discussion of whether adults and children have the same rights, one child answered that they have the same value. Another child said that adults have the right to drink alcohol while children do not, so they have different rights. They discussed discrimination against adults, young people and children. They themselves had all experienced discrimination. The Swedish children in the control group had heard about children’s rights at school, but they did not really know which rights they had.

The two groups of English children, those living in secure children’s homes and those in the control group, had no knowledge of the CRC. However, when asked to identify what rights they thought children “should” have, they chose rights that were reflected in the CRC. The children living in secure children’s homes felt strongly that it was important to be able to access their rights and spoke about the difficulties they had experienced in custody and their contact with the juvenile justice system.

In conclusion, in almost all of the groups with children in vulnerable situations, knowledge about children’s rights was absent or very limited.
Exceptions were the groups of asylum-seeking children and the Polish children experiencing poverty and exclusion, where children had some awareness of children’s rights. However, when children were asked which rights they should have or thought were important, they all identified rights that were reflected in the CRC. The limited responses in some cases where children were consulted could have been because these children were not used to be asked for their opinion. This could lead to the conclusion that more extensive work with the children to explain the concept of children’s rights and allowing them to apply the concept to their own lives might lead to different results. As in other studies, children in the Speak up! study often did not associate children’s rights with their own situation (ECDGJ, 2011). It seems to be easier for children to see the needs and the rights of other children and to express empathy for other children. Based on an analysis of the results, it could be concluded that the children in the control groups had a better knowledge and understanding of children’s rights than the groups with children who were in a marginalised situation. However, in both groups, children tended to think about children’s rights as being the rights of other children, instead of linking these rights to their own life situation.

What Rights are Important to Children

In the children’s focus group meetings, children were asked to choose the four most important rights they felt were relevant to their own circumstances and life situation. The articles in CRC are not in any particular order of priority. All rights are equally important. The CRC’s overall perspective is to secure children’s rights to survival, dignity, well-being, health, development, participation and non-discrimination, and the holistic approach of the CRC needs to be taken into account. The concept of priority rights was used in the children’s consultations to make the children think about their own lives and situations and reflect on what would need to change for them to ensure their rights are implemented. A matrix table (below) shows that the results for selected rights by the different groups of vulnerable and control groups of children are quite similar for participation rights and protection rights; however, for provision rights, the groups of children in vulnerable situations tend to choose these rights far more often than the control group. Children in the control groups, mainly from middle-class backgrounds, felt that the provision rights were often so obvious that they do not consider them as a key priority to be implemented.
Table 2: Children’s rights selected by children in vulnerable circumstances (x) and control groups (o)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROVISION RIGHTS</th>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>Hungary</th>
<th>Greece</th>
<th>Ireland</th>
<th>The Netherlands</th>
<th>Poland</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
<th>The UK</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Right to health care [art 24]</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>xo</td>
<td>xo</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to education [art 28, 29]</td>
<td>xo</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to housing [art 27]</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right of disabled children to special care [art 23]</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to secure income (social security) [art 26]</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total provision rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| PROTECTION RIGHTS                                                                 |          |         |        |         |                |        |        |        |       |
| Right to play [art 31]                                                           | x        | xo      |        |         |                |        |        |        | 2      |
| Right to express opinion and right to information [art 12, 17]                   | x        | xo      | x      | o       | x              | xo     | o      | 5      |

2 The Bulgarian children in the control group chose three priority rights.
3 In Hungary two focus groups were arranged for children in vulnerable circumstances.
4 In the Netherlands the asylum-seeking children chose seven priority rights.
5 In Sweden the deaf and hard-of hearing children chose five priority rights.
| Right of children from minorities to enjoy own culture [art 30] | x | | | | | 1 – |
| Total participation rights | | | | | | 8 7 |

## PROTECTION RIGHTS

| All children are equal [art 2] | x | XXO | o | XO | o | o | x | 5 5 |
| Refugee children have a right to special assistance [art 22] | | | | | | | X | xo | 2 1 |
| Right to be protected from torture and deprivation of liberty [art 37] | x | o | | | | xo | x | 3 2 |
| No child shall be abused or maltreated [art 19] | x | XXO | o | o | | xo | xo | 5 5 |
| Right to family reunification [art 10] | | | | | | | x | 1 |
| Protection of children without families [art 20] | o | | | | | o | 3 |
| Right to identity [art 8] | o | | | | | x | 1 1 |
| Protection from sexual exploitation [art 34] | | | | | | xo | 1 1 |

| Total protection rights | | | | | | 18 18 |
In some countries there were hardly any differences between the rights chosen by the group of children in vulnerable situations and those in the control group. In other countries the two groups chose completely different rights. Some chosen rights clearly reflect the particular vulnerability of the children; for example, in Greece, the Roma children chose the right to education, the right to play, the right to special assistance for refugee children, and the right to information as their priority rights, while the control group questioned the need to lay down rights like the right to play, the right to education and the right to health, since these rights were so obvious for them. Their parents would take care of these rights.

**Provision Rights**

The provision rights within the CRC emphasise the right of children to an adequate standard of living, health care, education and services. In general, the control groups chose hardly any of the provision rights as one their top four priority rights. This might lead to the conclusion that children in the control groups take these rights for granted and that they do not need to be implemented. The children in marginalised situations were conscious of threats to their need to be provided with food, shelter, health and education, and acknowledge the vulnerability of these provisions. The right to health care (art. 24) was chosen by a majority of the children experiencing vulnerable situations, and the Hungarian, Irish, Polish, Swedish and English children chose this as one of their priorities.

The Irish Traveller children said that the right to health care was top priority for them (‘It just seems like a very important one’) and they articulated the importance of health care regardless of background (‘Doesn't matter where they come from’), which also indicates an awareness of unequal treatment for particular groups. The Traveller community has a higher burden of ill-health than the general population (All Ireland Health Study, 2010).

Swedish deaf and hard-of-hearing children gave the highest priority to the right to health care and, in relation to this, to equal treatment for all. They highlighted the difference between having a disability and being unhealthy. When sick and visiting the health care system, the children indicated that adults received care more quickly than children and deaf and hard-of-hearing young people, who felt they were a lower priority for medical care. Their difficulty with communication in spoken language (most of them used sign language) was a problem when visiting health care institutions. Consequently, deaf and hard-of-hearing children faced “double discrimination”, both as children and as a person with a disability.
The right to be equal (art. 2) and to health care (art. 24) were particularly relevant for the children consulted in this study. The right to be listened to (art. 12) by medical staff was also relevant for the children when the right to health care was discussed.

**Right to Education (art. 28, 29)**
The right to education is laid down in two articles in the **UNCRC**: article 28 stipulates the child’s right to education on the basis of equal opportunities and article 29 stipulates the aims of education, i.e. that education should be directed at developing the child’s personality and talents, fostering respect for human rights and developing respect for the child’s own cultural and national values. This right was selected by a majority of children in vulnerable situations, including the Bulgarian, Hungarian, Greek, Irish and Swedish children.

All of the Greek Roma children were aware of the right of all children to be educated and go to school. Many of the children were not attending school, as they were involved in supporting their family financially by working illegally or caring for siblings. For the Roma children, the most fundamental and basic of educational skills is perceived as key to providing the skills necessary for survival in their world. The Bulgarian children from the Roma community also identified the right to education as a priority, since they had problems with attending classes at school for various reasons. At the same time they brought up the issue of violence and sexual abuse in relation to education and attending safe schools. They said that they have the right to study in a school free of sexual harassment.

The Hungarian children living in foster care felt strongly that children have a right to education, and that it was important for their future (‘They need education to find a job when they grow up’). In addition, they expressed their fear that the lack of education leads to homelessness.

The Swedish deaf and hard-of-hearing children wished that all teachers in the special school should be fully proficient in sign language so that they could communicate in their own first language: ‘All deaf and hard-of-hearing are entitled to receive education in their language. Everyone has the right to use sign language’.

**Right to Housing (art. 27)**
The CRC stipulates that children have a right to benefit from an adequate standard of living. Only the asylum-seeking children in the Netherlands chose this as one of their priority rights. They felt strongly about living in their own house. One of the children explained that he had two sisters and one brother, and the whole family of six shared four beds. He wished they could live in their own house.
own home: ‘I would be able to play more and have my own bed and sleep more peacefully. And my mum wouldn't be able to watch me all the time’.

**Children with Disabilities have the Right to Special Care (art. 23)**
The right of children with disabilities to special care is stipulated in article 23 of the **UNCRC**, and this right was chosen by the Swedish deaf and hard-of-hearing children and the asylum-seeking children in the Netherlands. The children discussed positive and negative aspects of being deaf or hard-of-hearing and illustrated these in drawings. Positive aspects were that they could sleep without being disturbed and that they could decide if they want to listen to someone. Negative aspects included that the children felt excluded; for example, ‘when someone disses me’ and a deaf child who was refused admittance in a child-minding section of a grocery store because he was deaf. The term “dissed” refers to the experience of children being insulted or dismissed. The children gave many examples of being “dissed” and being bullied. At a personal level, being “dissed” is not as systematic as being bullied, but it does involve discriminative acts. The deaf and hard-of-hearing children could be “dissed”, bullied and discriminated within the systems in society.

**Right to Social Security (art 26)**
The right to social security (art. 26) was chosen by the asylum-seeking children in the Netherlands. For them the right to a secure income is very important.

**Provision Rights: Conclusion**
The Speak Up! project has highlighted how the impact of exclusion gives children a greater awareness of the vulnerability of their rights. In general the control groups hardly chose any of the provision rights as one their top four priority rights, which might lead to the conclusion that children in the control groups took these rights for granted. Among the provision rights, the right to health care and to education was chosen by several of the groups in vulnerable situations or with special needs. The fact that awareness of the threats to provision rights was not apparent to the same degree in control groups is a very important outcome of the consultations with the different groups of children.

**Participation Rights**
The participation rights in the **CRC** emphasise the right of children to express their views in all matters affecting the child (art. 12) and their right to access to appropriate information (art. 17). The children could also choose from the right to play (art. 31) and the right of children from minorities to enjoy
their own culture (art. 30). A majority of the children felt strongly about their right to express their opinion and to receive appropriate information. Not all children chose this right as one of their four priority rights, but what emerged strongly from the consultations was that children felt they had a right to be listened to and that their views should be taken seriously. It became clear that the concept of children’s right to express their opinion and the right to information are more abstract concepts that were difficult to grasp for some groups of children. The right to play was only chosen by the Greek children, which might be explained that the other groups felt that other rights were more important to them if they could only choose four. Similarly, the right to enjoy their own culture was only chosen by the Irish Traveller children.

**Right to Express an Opinion and the Right to Information (arts. 12 and 17)**

The right of children to express their views in all matters affecting the child, and the right to information, was chosen by five groups of children, including the Swedish, the Dutch, the Greek, the Hungarian and the Bulgarian children.

The Hungarian children living in residential care chose the right to participate as the most important right and the statements made by the children emphasised that these children were hardly listened to, their opinion did not count or they were never asked. In addition, the children living in foster care from Hungary all felt very isolated in their foster families, and found that foster parents were not prepared or willing to listen to them nor understand the need to work on former traumas. During the consultations with the group of children living in foster care, there was more tension during the consultations and several hard to handle situations occurred. They started off being loud in their behaviour, but as they spent more time together the atmosphere became more relaxed. Their behaviour seemed to be a cry for more personal attention.

The deaf and hard-of-hearing children in Sweden felt they had the right to receive information in emergencies and in public transport situations in a way they are able to understand, which means not via loudspeakers, but for example via written text on displays. Information systems need to be modernised, taking accessibility in communication into account.

The Bulgarian children raised another issue, early marriage, which is part of their Roma culture. The Roma girls indicated that they have the right to decide ‘when to start their sex life and with whom’.

**Right of Children from Minorities to Enjoy their Own Culture (art. 30)**

Only the Irish Traveller children identified the right to enjoy your own culture (art. 30, UNCRC) as one of the four priority rights. The children said that they were proud of who they were and where they came from.
**Right to Play (art. 31)**
The Greek Roma children felt that the right to play was very important. Most Roma children did not have time to play, since their daily lives consisted of taking responsibility for finding food and bringing in money for the family. They had to take care of their siblings and, in some cases, children were left by themselves due to parents who suffer from alcohol and drug addiction.

**Participation Rights: Conclusion**
Apparently it is difficult to grasp the real meaning of the right to express an opinion and to be listened to. This may be because these rights are more abstract concepts than many other provision and protection rights. Many of the children in the control groups chose the right to express their opinion and the right to receive information as priority rights. Even those groups that did not choose these rights as priority rights felt strongly about the need to have their voices heard and to be listened to seriously. They talked about how adults, including parents and carers, did not listen to them. Awareness needs to be raised and children to be informed, particularly those in vulnerable situations, and professionals working with children about children's rights and the meaning of the right to participate and be listened to, must be taken seriously. The Council of Europe Recommendation on child and youth participation supports this need (Committee of Ministers, 2012).

**Protection Rights**
The protection rights in the **CRC** stress the right of children to be protected from abuse, neglect, exploitation and discrimination. The consulted children could choose their priority rights from the right to be treated equally (art. 2), the right of refugee children to special assistance (art. 22), the right to be protected from torture and deprivation of liberty (art. 37), the right not to be abused or maltreated (art. 19), the right to family reunification (art. 10), the right for children without families to be protected (art. 20), the right to identity (art. 8), and the right to be protected from sexual exploitation (art. 34).

The right to be treated equally and not to be discriminated was felt strongly about by many of the children consulted. Even though not all chose this as a priority right in discussions about other rights, they all indicated the need to be treated equally. The right for children not to be abused and maltreated was an important right for many children. Many children had experienced violence, including bullying, physical punishment, abuse and sexual violence either themselves or they had witnessed such violence and abuse.
They felt the government had a role to prevent violence and support parents in a non-violent upbringing of their children.

**Right to be Equal (art. 2)**

Some children felt they were discriminated in school, and not treated in the same way as settled children. Irish Traveller children are often subjected to derogatory name-calling by the settled children, such as “knacker” meaning useless and worth less than others, and they were perceived as unacceptable socially. Some children described that Traveller children were excluded or not allowed into some schools. Traveller children felt that they did not have a voice to change their situation at local or political level and they saw the same powerlessness around them in their parents. The children had no experience of their voices being heard and/or of positive results from their expression of their difficulties, such as name-calling in school.

Both the Hungarian groups of children living in foster care and the children in residential care felt the right to be equal was a priority right. There were several children of Roma origin in these groups who talked about their experience of racial discrimination, prejudice, pain and humiliation. They were very keen on expressing their opinion and the need to speak freely about their experiences of discrimination, abuse and exclusion. The Bulgarian Roma children felt that they had to be treated equally, particularly in their access to education. The deaf and hard-of-hearing children did not choose the right to be equal as their priority right, but talked a lot about being exposed to discrimination.

**Refugee Children have a Right to Special Assistance (art. 22)**

The asylum-seeking children in the Netherlands and the Greek children chose the right of refugee children to special assistance as one of their priority rights. The asylum-seeking children chose this right because of their own experiences as asylum-seekers in the Netherlands. The Greek Roma children identify themselves as a minority population in Greece, even though they are all Greek citizens, they often face social exclusion, similar to that experienced by refugees and illegal immigrants. There are high numbers of refugees living in Greece and the children were after explanations of the facilitators able to understand the situation faced by refugees.

**Right to be Protected from Torture and Deprivation of Liberty (art. 37)**

The right to be protected from torture and deprivation of liberty was chosen by two groups of children in vulnerable situations, those in the UK and in Poland. The choice of the English children was obvious since they all live in secure
children’s homes. When the children were asked what torture meant to them, they mentioned violence, rape and unwanted touching. The children knew that, even if they break the law, they have the right to be treated humanely and they have a right to be protected. The Polish children discussed the fact that children need to be protected from deprivation of liberty and, like the English children, they felt that children and adults should not be in the same prison and children in detention should be able to maintain contact with their parents.

**Right Not to be Abused or Maltreated (art. 19)**
The Polish, English, Bulgarian vulnerable children and both groups of Hungarian children chose the right to be protected from abuse or maltreatment (art. 19) as one of their four priority rights. The CRC Committee issued a General Comment in 2011:

> Victims of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment are often children who are marginalised, disadvantaged and discriminated against and who lack the protection of adults responsible for defending their rights and best interests. This includes children in conflict with the law, children in street situations, minorities and indigenous children, and unaccompanied children.

**UNCRC Committee, 2011, 13: 26**

The Polish children felt that a child must not be abused mentally or physically, since that might make them feel hurt, or angry, and it may lead to suicide. When the children continued discussing violence, abuse and bullying, they described having witnessed incidences of violence. The Polish children were asked to throw a sweet-wrapper in a cup under the table if they had ever experienced a day in their lives when they thought about committing suicide. Nine out of the twelve children had thrown in their sweet-wrapper so they had thought about committing suicide, which meant that it was very important for them to talk about their quality of life.

The Bulgarian Roma children spoke about problems at home with their parents, and said that many parents use physical punishment as a method of disciplining their children. The children referred to their right not to be physically punished, and felt that their parents should use conversation instead. The English children described that abuse can be physical, sexual and emotional. Bullying was also identified as a form of abuse. The English children living in secure homes did not talk so much about their own experience of violence or abuse, but more about other children who had this experience. The Hungarian children discussed openly their experiences of abuse, misuse, degradation, and humiliation by the staff (even sexual abuse, harassment) in the residential
home. These were discussed as part of issues related to hierarchy and it was mixed up with all kinds of disciplinary measures and forms of punishment. The children also described the role of parents and the bad memories of parental abuse. At the same time the positive role of some neighbours and other family members helping them in crisis situations was mentioned. Several children living in foster care found that corporal punishment was a form of acceptable discipline, though other children said that “from hitting one cannot learn”. These children knew nothing about the prohibition of corporal punishment in Hungary. Like the children in residential care, the children living in foster care had also experienced abuse and felt hurt that they had access to no adequate services to heal and express their feelings and anger.

**Protection from Sexual Exploitation (art. 34)**
The right to be protected from sexual exploitation is linked to article 34. This right was not included in the list of rights in the children's rights game for children to choose from, but was added by the Swedish facilitators, as research in Sweden has shown that girls and boys with disabilities, 15–16 years of age, report a significantly higher rate of sexual debut than adolescents with no disabilities (Brunnberg, Lindén Boström & Berglund, 2009). The sexual debut may be voluntary or involuntary, and may occur in an abusive situation. Another study revealed that force at first intercourse is more common among girls aged 17–18 with multiple disabilities or one disability, than those without disability (Brunnberg, Lindén Boström & Berglund, 2012). These studies show that disabled children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse than children without a disability.

Indeed, the Swedish children chose this right as a very important right. The deaf and hard-of-hearing children had friends who had been exposed to sexual abuse and, some weeks before the consultation, the children in the control group had witnessed ongoing sexual abuse of a younger girl by three men. They called the police but the police did not do anything to help the abused girl. They themselves had been traumatised and were after some days given psychological help from a social worker at school.

**Right to Family Reunification (art. 10)**
The asylum-seeking children in the Netherlands chose the right to family reunification as one of their priority rights; they felt that the right to stay together as a family was very important to them.

**Right to an Identity (art. 8)**
Only the Polish children chose the right to an identity, including name, nationality and family ties as a priority right. They felt it was obvious that all children
have a right to an identity, to practice their religion, to use the language of their
group, and to lead their own cultural life. They knew children from minority
groups, but they did not know any children without a name or nationality.

**Protection Rights: Conclusion**

Many of the children in the control groups chose protection rights as being
priority rights, in particular the right to be protected from torture and depriva-
tion of liberty, protection from abuse and maltreatment, and protection of
children without families. Even though the children did not have direct experi-
ence of the violation of these rights in their daily lives, they either knew about
incidences of violence in their neighbourhood or they were concerned with
bullying. Bullying is considered by both vulnerable and non-vulnerable chil-
dren as an act of violence which needs to be combated. Like the children in
vulnerable situations, a majority of the control groups felt strongly about the
right to be treated equally and not to be discriminated.

Five of the groups in vulnerable situations – the Bulgarian, Hungarian,
English and Polish – and five of the consulted control groups, the Irish, Greek,
Hungarian, English and Polish, chose the right of children not be abused or
maltreated as one of the priority rights to be protected (art. 19). They felt that
children need to be protected against abuse. The children could mention
numerous examples of abuse, including children who work in the household
and the abuse of children as soldiers (known from the media). The children
proposed that actions be taken to eliminate all violence against children. The
children proposed that a role be given to the government to prevent and pro-
tect children from violence, and the children saw a role for teachers to monitor
abused children. The children mentioned that teachers should be asked if they
were aware of any children being abused and, if so, the children should be
visited in their houses. The children also proposed regular unexpected/
unannounced checks in the houses were children live. The English children
mentioned the role of social services, which could provide help to both parents
and children. Schools could also have a role in identifying cases of abuse. The
children were concerned that the police and teachers would not believe them
if they reported abuse, unless there was evidence, and they were afraid about
whether confidentiality would be kept. Similarly, the Swedish children dis-
cussed the need to be protected from sexual abuse and the need to be listened
to seriously when reporting this to the authorities. These outcomes show the
need for listening to children seriously and for treating reports of abuse
confidentially.

The children felt that all children in care should be part of a family and they
should all be treated equally. They also felt that children should have a say in
care decisions. They felt it was not fair for children in care to be moved around often as this can have an impact on many areas of their lives. They felt that there should be just one child per carer, to ensure each child gets enough care and attention (United Nations, 2005; Committee of Ministers, 2005).

Comparative Outcomes between European Countries

Several children’s rights were selected as priority rights in almost all of the eight countries that participated in the consultation. These included the right to health care (art. 24), the right to education (art. 28, 29), the right to express an opinion and the right to information (art. 12, 17), the right for all children to be treated equally (art. 2), and the right not to be abused or maltreated (art. 19). The selection of these rights indicates that there is no difference between cultural background and countries in the selection of these rights. These rights are basic rights for most children in all the eight countries that participated in the consultations, which became clear in the overall conclusions of the study.

In some countries children chose very different rights due to their experiences. For example, in the Netherlands the asylum-seeking children attached importance to refugee rights, family reunification rights, the right to play, and provision rights such as housing, disability rights and a secure income. In Sweden the right to be protected from sexual exploitation was considered as crucial due to experiences the consulted children had as witnesses to violations of this right.

No specific conclusions can be drawn regarding the selected rights per country. There is no pattern indicating that children in Western or Northern European countries (Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland and the UK) select different rights from children in Eastern Europe (Poland and Hungary) or South-Eastern Europe (Bulgaria and Greece). The key selected rights are similar in all of the countries in which children participated in the consultations, and the other selected rights are largely linked to children’s own experiences or knowledge, such as the rights of refugee children and children with disabilities.

Children’s Recommendations to Improve the Protection of Children’s Rights

In cases where children came up with proposals for their national authorities or the EU, the children in vulnerable situations and those in the control groups had similar recommendations. However, it is noted that children in the control
group had more ideas and proposals than children in vulnerable circumstances, who often found it difficult to express themselves and come up with concrete ideas. In the following presentation of the children’s ideas and recommendations to improve the protection of children’s rights, we do not distinguish between type of group or country.

The Ideas and Recommendations from the Children Included:

1. **Provide information on children’s rights to children**
   Examples of this were that: “Children should be told about children’s rights from birth”; “Write a book on children’s rights for all children to take home”; “Ensure that there are more television programmes which discuss children’s rights”.

2. **Children should be heard in society and by professionals**
   Examples of situations when children should have their voices heard were that: “Adults should give children the opportunity to speak, and children should be able to vote”; “Police, professionals in custodial settings, health care professionals and in other authorities need to know about their responsibility to give information to children and listen to them”; “In emergency situations in health care and transportation, make use of modern technology to communicate”; “Organize education for children with disabilities in a new way in which children’s voices are listened to”; “Children must be taken seriously by the police when they report (sexual) abuse of children”.

3. **Ensure equal treatment for basic needs, education, medical treatment and so all children can get information in emergency situations**
   Examples of this were: “Provide financial support to poor families to enable them to send their children to regular schools”; “Ensure all children can have free medical treatment, including poor children; “Ensure the use of interpreters and modern technology for communication in emergency situations in health care”; “Raise taxes if finances are needed to pay for schools and medical treatment for everyone; “Address economic inequality by providing grants to parents to pay for basic needs such as food and clothes in the first years of their children’s lives and providing grants to young people who cannot afford to pay university fees to improve their access to life opportunities”.

4. **Stop child abuse and violence**
   Examples of children’s different recommendations to adults were: “Teachers need to monitor and stop incidences of violence”; “Ensure that staff in different settings are trained to work with children”; “Prohibit brothels and
5. **Stop children’s deprivation of liberty**

Examples of children’s recommendations were: “Ensure that children are not treated in the same way as adults in juvenile justice institutions”; “Stop placing children into custody unnecessarily, since this has a substantial impact on their lives, and raise awareness of this with adults”; “Introduce alternative sentences such as compensating the victim, electronic tags, indoor curfews and working with the youth offending team”; “Listen to what young people suspected of committing a crime have to say”; “Listen to young people who report an offence”; “Both parents and the government have a role to play in protecting children from torture”; “Parents should be present with the child throughout the criminal justice process to help protect their rights or another adult could fulfil that role”.

6. **Ensure special assistance to refugee children**

Children’s recommendations were: “Change the policies and procedures for asylum-seekers to the advantage of refugee and asylum-seeking children; for example, speedy procedures to ensure clarity, and asylum-seeking children should not be detained and need more privacy in the transition centres”; “End all wars so that people stop fleeing from their country to another”.

Many of the recommendations from the children to the politicians were based in the children’s own experiences. In several of the groups the children also were asked what their dreams for the future were or what they would change if they were Prime Minister. Many of the dreams and recommendations were linked to financial support for their families and for children living in vulnerable circumstances.

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**Gaps in Children’s Rights in Europe**

The children in the Speak Up! project highlighted three key gaps regarding the protection of children’s rights in Europe. The first is that children, particularly children in vulnerable circumstances, are insufficiently aware of their rights. All children in the study were keen to know about their rights, even children...
who had never heard about rights before and who had no idea what these were about. The children in the Eurobarometer surveys, who were older than the children in the Speak up! Project, also indicated that they wanted more communication about children’s rights (see Eurobarometer, 2009). The majority of the young people (15–18 years old) were aware that people under 18 enjoyed specific rights compared to adults. However, the majority were not aware of their rights and they also requested more information on children’s rights. Children in vulnerable circumstances in the Speak up! project in general knew a lot less or nothing at all about children’s rights, while the children in the control groups knew more about their rights than the children in vulnerable situations. Children in vulnerable situations often could not link children’s rights to their own personal situation and, if children knew about their rights, they did not know how to solve problems when their rights were violated.

The second gap highlighted was that children mainly aged 12–15 years still face discrimination not only due to disability, ethnic background or social disadvantage but also due to being under 18. Age discrimination against children is still very little recognised and understood, and there are few policies that aim to address it. A first step would be to increase awareness of age discrimination against children and its impact. This should be followed by an assessment of how existing anti-discrimination EU legislation could be better applied to protect children.

The third gap highlighted was that children are too rarely asked their opinion on matters that affect them. Children living in vulnerable circumstances in particular had very little experience of being listened to. Many of them felt that their opinion was disregarded. Some found it difficult to express their own opinion because they had so few opportunities to think about what was important to them as individuals and to make their own choices in life. There is a need to strengthen awareness and recognition of good practice in children’s participation.

In the Speak Up! consultations, many of the children felt strongly about the right to be treated equally. This was raised not only in relation to discrimination based on different grounds, but also in relation to provision rights such as the right to education, the right to health care and the right to housing, and in relation to the protection of specific vulnerable groups of children such as children with disabilities, refugee children and children in care. Children want to be respected for who they are and they therefore need to be seen as competent partners in society. Children felt empathy for the needs of other children in marginalised situations.
The categories of children’s rights according to the UNCRC – provision rights, participation rights and protection rights – had different outcomes when the groups experiencing vulnerable situations, and the control groups, selected priority rights. The children in vulnerable circumstances tended to choose far more provision rights than the control groups, whilst both groups attach equal priority to participation rights and protection rights. An explanation for this could be that most of the children in vulnerable situations lack equal access to basic needs and services such as health care and education or they are seeking specific care (e.g. disabled children). For the control groups, access to these rights is often so obvious that they sometimes do not even recognise these as rights that need to be guaranteed by governments.

In the section of provision rights, the Speak Up! project highlighted how the impact of exclusion gives children a greater awareness of the vulnerability of their rights, threats to the rights, and the importance of their protection. The fact that awareness of the threats to provision rights was not apparent to the same degree in control groups is a very important outcome of the consultations with the different groups of children. It shows the inequity between the control groups and groups with children living in vulnerable circumstances, and the lack of integration of children living in vulnerable situations or with special needs.

There is a need for “child-friendly” information on children’s rights and where they can go when their rights are violated. Children need to be informed about complaints procedures in a child-friendly and accessible way, taking into account that abused children and children in other vulnerable situations, are often not reached via the usual communication channels, such as schools and the Internet. Children felt that they were not taken seriously when reporting child abuse or sexual abuse to the authorities. Authorities need to ensure that children who are victims or who witness violence and abuse are listened to and taken seriously. This is very important so that children in this vulnerable situation are not also abused by society.

The children felt strongly that children should only be placed in juvenile justice institutions as a last resort. They favoured alternative sentences instead and attached importance to children not being placed together with adults in custodial settings. They felt that staff in juvenile justice institutions need to be trained to work with children. During criminal justice proceedings, parents or another adult need to be present to ensure that the child’s rights are protected. The most important outcome regarding the protection of the rights of refugee children was the need for fast and clear asylum-seeking procedures that take the best interests of the child into account. Regarding family reunification measures, the best interests of the child would also have to be core to the decision.
Many of the children’s recommendations and dreams concerned protection of children at risk, but also about children getting information about the rights of children and the right to be listened to.

Conclusions

A conclusion from the Speak up! project is that children should not be viewed as vulnerable passive victims but as social actors in vulnerable situations. It is important that they are heard and listened to and that they receive the support and protection they need to be able to speak up. Another conclusion is that children in Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands, especially children in vulnerable situations or with special needs, need more information about their rights and about how to solve problems when their rights are violated. Consequently, there is a need for practical tips in children’s rights programmes about how to deal with situations where their rights are violated. The Speak Up! consultations showed the importance of both the need to be able to participate in decisions affecting children’s lives and the need to have more information about children’s rights. Children want to be consulted, to be listened to, and to have their views taken seriously.

Like other children, children in vulnerable situations could be consulted in small groups such as focus groups and individual interviews with creative communication, such as world café style, p1-interviews, role play, children’s rights games, etc. (see Eurochild, 2013a). This means not only including children’s rights education in the national educational curricula, but also ensuring that service providers and professionals working directly with children living in vulnerable situations or with special needs are trained to provide information on the rights of children and to listen to the children.

A tentative conclusion is that there seems to be a difference between the group of children with disabilities and the other vulnerable groups in the way they discussed children’s rights. The deaf and hard-of-hearing children had

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6 p1-interviews are focus groups with creative elements developed together with young people. The session begins with all of the participants taking two different colored p1-notes and writing something positive and something negative about the theme of the session. All participants will read the others’ main ideas on the subject and the discussion begins with the positive and negative aspects. The focus groups also end with a creative activity phase concerning the future. Children are asked to think of a wish for the future that is related to the theme and to write it on two sunbeams; then the session is ended by making a sun out of all the participants’ dreams about the future. (see Brunnberg, 2013).
clear views on their rights, though they also mainly selected provision rights like a majority of the other vulnerable groups. Children with disabilities have special needs for support, while also being a high-risk group for maltreatment and exclusion. Literature reviews (Eurochild, 2011; Latimier and Šiška, 2011) have shown a very limited number of examples of consultations with children with disabilities. More research involving groups of children with different disabilities and in different countries is recommended, since this could lead to different conclusions about their knowledge and opinions about children’s rights.

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